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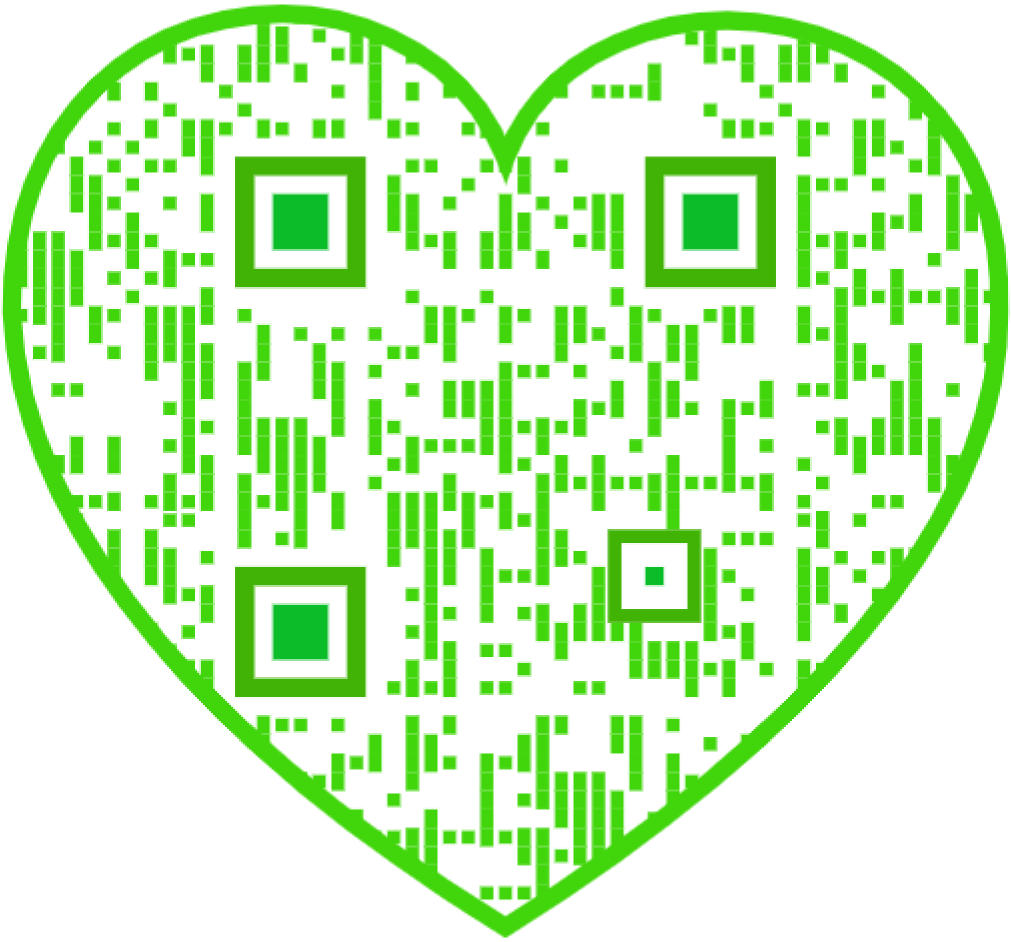

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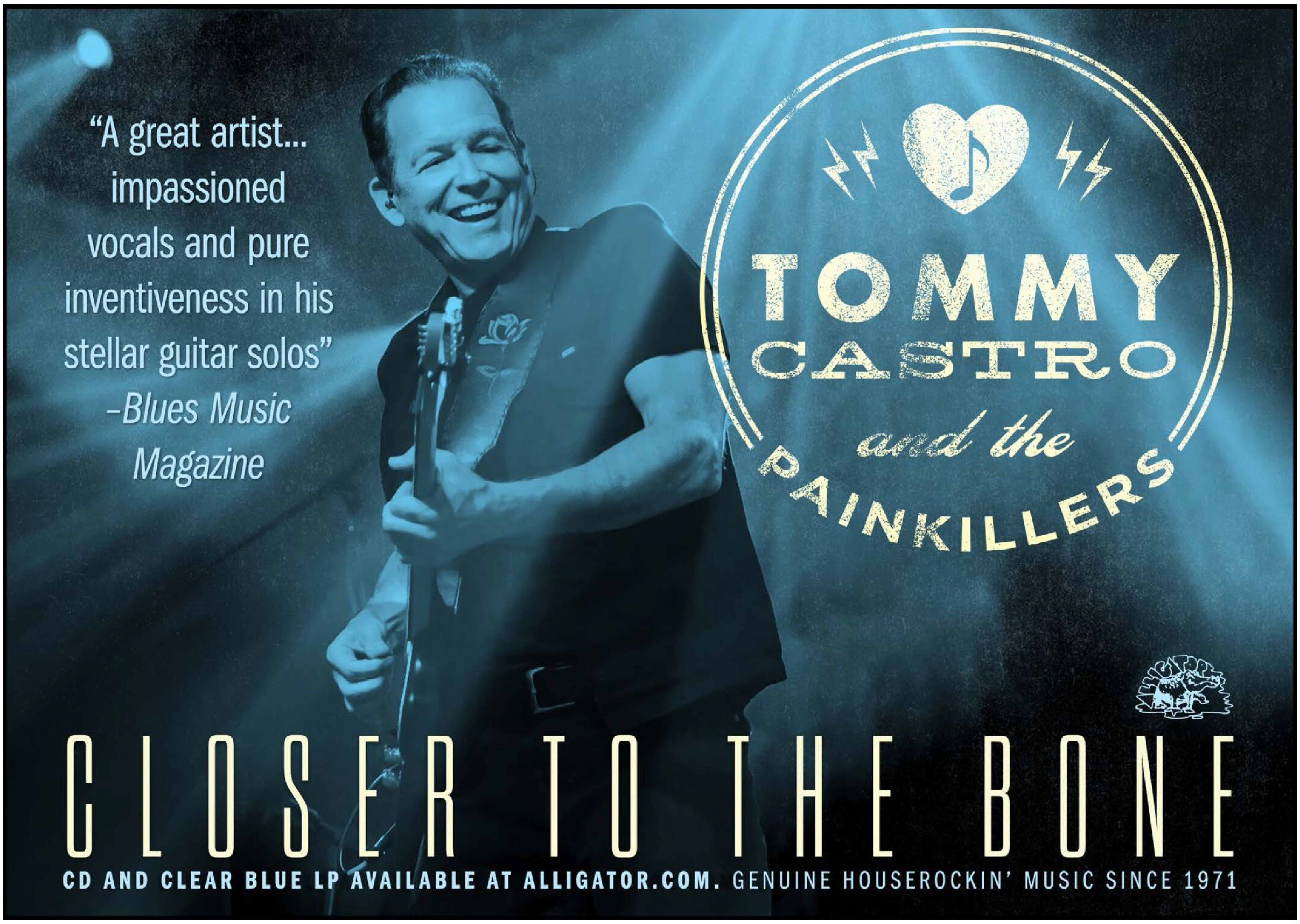

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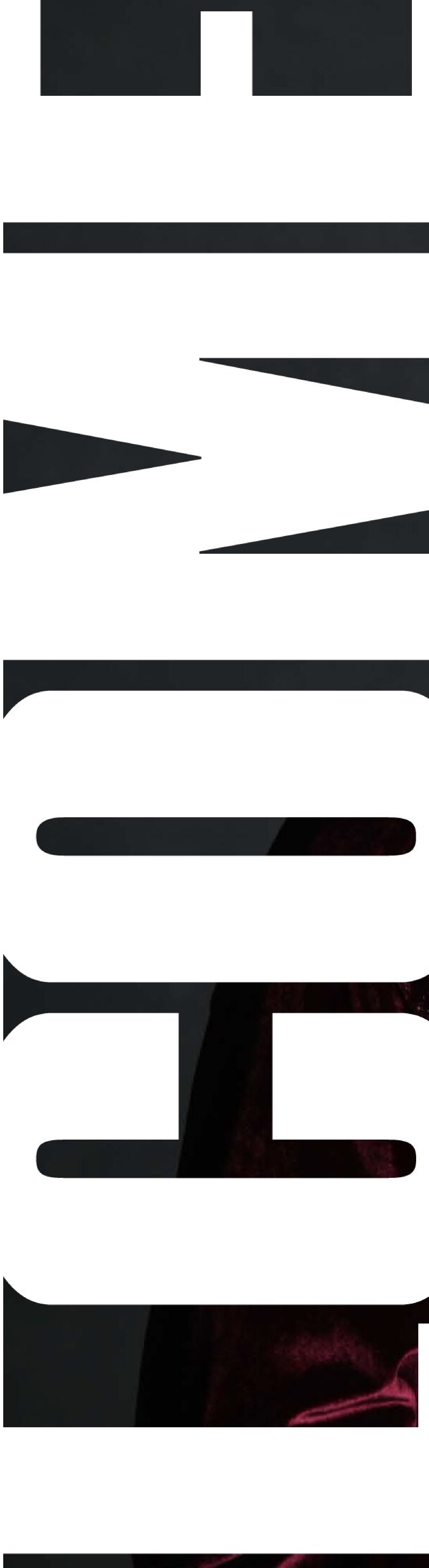

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MIKE FARRIS

Belfast City Council welcomes proposals for a statue of Blues legend Gary Moore

Belfast City councillors have offered resounding support for a statue of Blues guitar legend Gary Moore.

At the city's Growth and Regeneration Committee meeting this week, councillors heard a proposal to seek land to host a statue in the Cathedral Quarter - a musical and cultural hub in the city.

The Gary Moore statue project - launched in 2019 - has so far raised €9,987.73 through a variety of fundraising schemes.

An increase in Gary Moore memorial concerts around the world since the statue project's inception, has given rise to demand that the city celebrates Belfast-born Moore, who enjoyed two spells with Thin Lizzy and had a successful solo career as a rock guitarist before switching to blues with the best-selling Still Got the Blues album in 1990.

Cllr Brian Smyth (Green Party) who has championed the campaign, was complimented on his passion, knowledge and research on the project.

Cllr Brian Smyth commented on X: "This evening at committee, Belfast City Council agreed to my proposal to carry out a land check of the sites in the Cathedral Quarter for a potential Gary Moore statue."

He added, "The plan as well as a statue is for a not for profit foundation to support young musicians. The statue tells a story for many who may not have known about him, including tourists."

The costs for the statue are to be raised by fans attending Gary Moore tribute shows, the sale of t-shirts, or online at https://www.idonate.ie/crowdfunder/GaryMooreStatue

A farewell to Sam Moore - 1935-2025

Stephen Harrison Gage Skidmore

During a career spanning over six decades, Sam Moore, during his solo years, or with his partner, Dave Pratter, (Sam and Dave) has influenced not just individuals, but two generations of musicians, writers, and audiences alike. Born in Miami, Florida, Moore had an early introduction to harsh street life, mainly due to his maternal father's exploits, resulting in his mother remarrying, and Sam taking the surname of his stepfather. Years later, the most important and most pivotal part of his career began with him teaming up with Pratter, and the two of them embarking on an often tumultuous, but gratifying ride with the release of their seminal hit, Soul Man in 1967.

Co-written by Issac Hayes and David Porter, the song would cement them in the world of Soul and Blues for the rest of their lives. The song revived both of their careers with the release of Saturday Night Live and the classic cult movie, The Blues Brothers, which also featured another hit song of the pair, Hold On, I'm Comin'.

Sam Moore was not only a great singer, but he was also proficient as a Saxophone player, and along with his wife, Joyce at the time, helped to found a music education programme for schools. Moore certainly lived the Rock and Roll lifestyle, once claiming to have fathered over twenty children, and became heavily addicted to drugs which at one point resulted in him being incarcerated in prison.

But, he leaves behind an amazing legacy of music and has, quite rightly, achieved notable luminaries such as Bruce Springsteen among his loyal fans, in fact, Moore joined Springsteen on his 2022 Soul covers album, Only The Strong Survive. In 2006, Sam Moore released a solo album, Overnight Sensational, alongside guests such as Mariah Carey, Springsteen, Eric Clapton, Sting, and Steve Winwood. A truly fitting appreciation from a host of musical giants.

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When it comes to modern blues with a gritty edge and soulful storytelling, few artists stand out like Russell Alexander of the Hitman Blues Band. As a seasoned guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter, Alexander has spent decades redefining the genre, blending traditional blues roots with contemporary rock energy.

Colin Campbell **Laurence Harvey**

Known for his electrifying stage presence and deeply authentic sound, Russell has taken his band from New York City's underground blues scene to international acclaim. In this exclusive interview, we discuss the making of the band's latest release, Calling Long Distance.

The Unorthodox Production Process
When Russell "The Hitman" Alexander sat down to create his latest blues masterpiece, Calling Long Distance; it wasn't your typical studio experience. "Some of the songs on the album, we had never actually played live," he admits. Instead, the process began at his home studio, where he wrote, recorded demos, and mapped out horn sections and rhythm lines. With a tight budget, he rehearsed sparingly, assembling his band in pieces rather than all at once.

Recording took place at Parcheesi Studios with engineer-producer Bob Stander at the helm. Alexander recounts a fast-paced approach: "We laid down drums and bass in one session, with me playing guitar and singing scratch tracks. I told my guys, 'You've got one shot at this.'" Limited time and resources meant there was no luxury of revisiting sessions. This urgency didn't hinder the album; instead, it added raw energy and authenticity.

OVERCOMING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL HURDLES

Despite the meticulous planning, life threw curveballs. Midway through production, Bob's father passed away, delaying sessions for months. Alexander faced his own challenges, too. As he worked on guitar leads, osteoarthritis in his hands made holding a pick nearly impossible. He adapted using a special tool, redistributing pressure to his palm. "All the leads were done with that, it was tough, but it worked." If that wasn't enough, on the day backup vocals were scheduled, Alexander's back gave out completely. Unable to stand, he directed the session from his living room floor. "Anytime I moved, or even sneezed, my back would spasm." Yet, his team powered through, resulting in harmonies that sound flawless on the album.

THE CREATIVE HEART OF A BLUESMAN

For Alexander, songwriting is a mix of inspiration and discipline. "Sometimes a lyric idea is so strong that I build music around it. Other times, I start with a riff." He captures ideas using telephone app or, in earlier days, scribbled notes on scraps of paper.

The track, Back To The Blues, evolved from an earlier concept called Put a Dollar in the Hat, which didn't feel right. "There was one line I had written: 'I took the long way 'round to get back to the blues.' It became the song's focal point," he shares. The result is a powerful, soulful piece that resonates deeply with listeners. "I was kind of worried that it wasn't bluesy enough."

TALES BEHIND THE TRACKS

Each song on the album tells its own story. Take Calling Long Distance, inspired by a Ouija board sticker Alexander spotted in Brighton, which evolved into a narrative about longing to communicate with those who've passed on. "I have friends who have passed away and I'd really like to ask him something. I thought, well, what if it were like life and death, the only way I could get out of this situation is by getting hold of them." Or the playful Edge of the Bed, born out of Alexander's gripes about losing sleeping space to his wife, kids, and pets. "It doesn't matter how big the bed is, you're going to end up on one little, tiny corner of it trying not to fall off."

Then there's Blood Alley, an instrumental surf-blues track channelling Dick Dale and Link Wray. To guide his saxophonist, Alexander painted a vivid picture: "Imagine someone chasing you with a chainsaw. Your only way to express terror is through your sax." The resulting performance is electrifying.

The album also features a unique take on Johnny Cash's Folsom Prison Blues. Alexander transformed it into a slow blues, emphasising the prisoner's struggle against a vengeful warden. "It's about holding on to the belief that one day, freedom, whether in this life or the next, will come."

Another quirky tune is Side Pocket For A Toad. Russell explains," This is a beer from Tring Brewery, which is in the town of Tring, UK. They make it there, it's a small brewery, they can only distribute it to some local pubs, I can't get it here in America. I love IPAs and it's one of my favourite ones. This is an archaic expression that means something completely useless. the song, is about a guy saying, or a woman saying you are just completely useless!"

The song We're Gonna Party Tonight is a party tune. "I wanted to have a good party song," describing it as an "up-tempo" and "happy blues" tune that challenges the stereotype that blues are always sad. Inspired by a scene in Animal House where, after everything goes wrong, a character says, "There's only one thing to do… throw a party," the song embodies the spirit of celebrating in the face of adversity. As Russell puts it, "Everything is going wrong. So, what else are we going to do? We'll throw a party." To end on a brighter note, the story concludes with the character winning the lottery. Collaboration has been central to Alexander's musical journey. One standout moment came when he encountered Stuart Maxwell of The Shuffle Pack Blues Band. Watching the band perform the track, Watch That Thing! Alexander immediately knew he wanted to cover it.

"I asked Stuart if I could play it, and he said, 'As long as you credit me.' I do that every time, without fail," he laughed. But even this collaboration came with a twist. "I pestered Stuart for months to send me the lyrics. When I finally got them, I added some verses, although the song is still his, we put a T-Bone Walker shuffle spin on it." The collaborative spirit didn't end there. When a Shuffle Pack gig hit a last-minute snag, Alexander stepped in to perform with Maxwell and Derek, turning what could've been a disaster into an impromptu blues jam.

The song I Know You're Ryder reimagines a classic tune that Russell says is "played to death. I like the song. I rewrote some of the lyrics since the song is public domain. I wanted to make it relatable it relatable, adding lines like, "Your father says that my kind is no good. So, I shoved my fist through his long white hood." Drawing inspiration from the song, Stagger Lee by Lloyd Price, he incorporated a choral background to enhance the song, saying, "Originally I did it without it, and now that I have it with it, I'm like, yeah, that way sucked, it's gotta be done this way."

BLUES REIMAGINING: KRISTOFFERSON TO FIELD HOLLERS

Reinterpreting songs is an Alexander hallmark. His version of Kris Kristofferson's Sunday Morning Coming Down reimagines the country classic as a blues anthem. "It's a blues song at heart," he insisted. "This guy's hungover on a street corner, it's gritty and raw. That's the blues surely." He also reflected on Kristofferson's rise from janitor at Sun Studios to global icon, a journey fuelled by persistence and a little help from Johnny Cash's wife. "The story's a perfect example of how passion and grit pay off. That's what the blues is about." Similarly, his original track, the final song on the album, Wide Old River takes inspiration from field hollers and slave chants. "People talk about the blues coming from those origins, but I've actually heard the real thing thanks to collections like the Smithsonian's," he said. "This song updates that groove, and its story; life as a river that eventually carries you home, it speaks to universal truths."

BALANCING TRADITION AND INNOVATION

From double entendres in bawdy tracks to exploring sombre themes, his work is a testament to the blues genre's versatility. Songs like Foolish Pride highlight how universal emotions, whether personal or political can be channelled into music. Originally inspired by ideological divides, the song evolved into something more intimate. "It's about how pride can drive people apart, whether it's friends, family, or lovers," he said. While his music often experiments with modern twists, Alexander stays firmly grounded in tradition. "The blues is a living art form," he said. "It's about taking what's come before and making it resonate for today. That's what I try to do with every song, whether it's one I've written or one I've reimagined."

THE MAGIC BEHIND THE MUSIC

The production process for the album was no small feat. Russell revealed that a staggering 200 hours were spent on the album, with over 75 of those hours dedicated to mixing. "It's not about the playing time," he explained. "Most of the time is spent listening back, adjusting, and getting every detail just right."

Bob's approach to collaborating with musicians also stood out. "He has this way of getting the best out of everyone without being insulting," Russell said, chuckling. "He'd say, 'That was great. Let's do one more,' and nine takes later, you still can't be mad at him because he's so encouraging."

For Russell, there's no substitute for the human touch in music. While he uses digital tools for pre-production, he's adamant about the irreplaceable quality of live musicianship. "You can't replicate the nuance of a real horn player," he said. "It's that humanity, those imperfections, which make the music come alive."

TESTING THE WATERS

Before recording, many of the songs hadn't been "road-tested" with the band. Tracks like Back to the Blues and Foolish Pride were entirely new to the lineup. Russell made it a priority to integrate these songs into their live performances. To make room for the new material, he even polled fans through his newsletter to decide which older tracks to retire. "The feedback surprised me," he admitted. "Some songs I thought were must-plays turned out to be ones the audience was ready to let go."

SEQUENCING FOR THE OLD-SCHOOL LISTENER

While today's streaming culture leans toward single tracks, Alexander hopes listeners will appreciate the album. "I paced it like a live show; balancing tempos and moods," he explains. For him, albums are journeys, and sometimes, the songs that don't grab you at first become favourites over time.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

With the album complete, Russell is eager to take it on the road. Scotland holds a special place in his heart, not just for its enthusiastic audiences but also for its personal significance. A DNA test recently revealed a hidden branch of his family tree rooted in Scotland. "I've got five relatives there I never knew about," he shared with a laugh. Russell hopes to return to iconic venues like Edinburgh's Voodoo Rooms and expand to new locations across Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. "We're always evolving, just like the blues. You have to grow, change, and keep pushing forward."

A TESTAMENT TO RESILIENCE

This release is a testament to Alexander's perseverance. Through physical pain, personal loss, and tight deadlines, he crafted a record that captures the heart of the blues; raw, heartfelt, and unyielding.

For further information see: www.hitmanbluesband.com

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‘The Original Bessie Brown’

Let’s celebrate Bessie Brown, a badass Blues Lady who wasn’t afraid to be bold with her thoughts on discrimination and injustice in the 1920s Classic Blues Era.

Born March 2, 1890 in Marysville, Ohio, Bessie Brown performed Blues, Jazz and Cabaret. She would sometimes record under the pseudonyms Sadie Green and Caroline Lee. Often known as ‘The Original Bessie Brown,’ she should not be mistaken for the Bessie Brown who performed vaudeville and blues duets with George W. Williams during the same period.

Like most Classic Blues Singers, Bessie began her music career performing on the Vaudeville circuit before signing her first recording contract in 1925. Throughout her career she recorded for top record labels including Brunswick, Columbia and Vocalion. Bessie Brown was a versatile performer who was as comfortable with Musical Theatre as she was The Blues and sometimes would even appear as a male impersonator. She performed in revues such as Moonshine Revue, The Whirl of Joy, and Dark-Town Frolics, and graced the stage as a cabaret artist, mainly on the East Coast.

Bessie had a wonderful deep tone and resonant vibrato delivered with great projection and authority. She brings her musical theatre diction and precision into her blues songs giving her a unique sound. Bessie released some fantastic material, regularly working with top pianists and writers including Porter Grainger, Clarence Williams and Fletcher Henderson.

In the late 20’s Bessie Brown married Clarence Shaw, a Deputy Sheriff in Cleveland. Sadly, Sheriff Shaw treated her terribly. I have huge respect for Bessie, who boldly sued her husband for divorce, calling out his behavior and domestic abuse to the local papers:

I have even further respect for Bessie who in March the following year released “He just don’t appeal to me”, a song with a bold feminist message whereby she sings of a man being “tall and handsome”, but she wants more...

“I’ve done most everything I could to love this man of mine. But I’ve found out it ain’t no, so I’ve just done quit trying”

She then asserts herself as a woman who will not settle for a man who isn’t right for her. She sings: “He just don’t appeal to me, and I’m not satisfied!”

On the flipside of the record is another stand-out Bessie Brown song entitled “Song from a Cotton Field.” Here she steps away from the Blues, leaning more towards Jazz and Musical Theatre influences. Lyrically, this song takes inspiration from work-songs sung in slavery and is a strong reminder of the racism Black Americans continue to face since emancipation. Bessie uses her powerful voice to protest racial oppression as she sings:

“All my life, I’ve been makin’ it All my life, white folks takin’ it”

Whilst 1920s Blues and Jazz are full of social protest, this bold lyric composed by Porter Grainger stands out because it is not shielded or softened with metaphor – Bessie is direct, no filter.

Perhaps Bessie Brown and Porter Grainger were inspired by NAACP Activist W.E.B Du Bois who in 1926 famously wrote “all art is propaganda and ever must be” in The Crisis Magazine.

Like many Blues Singers, as the Great Depression of the 1930s hit, Bessie Brown retired from show business. She dedicated her time to raising her three children and passed away at just 65 years of age having suffered a heart attack.

Bessie Brown was a pioneer. Her bold lyrics and themes of independence and self-respect in songs like “He Just Don’t Appeal to Me” paved the way for future female artists to address feminist issues in their music. Her song “Song from a Cotton Field” is a powerful example of how music can be harnessed for social protest. This direct approach to social commentary would influence later Jazz and Blues artists of the Civil Rights era such as Nina Simone who also used her platform to address social and political issues without euphemism.

Dani Wilde

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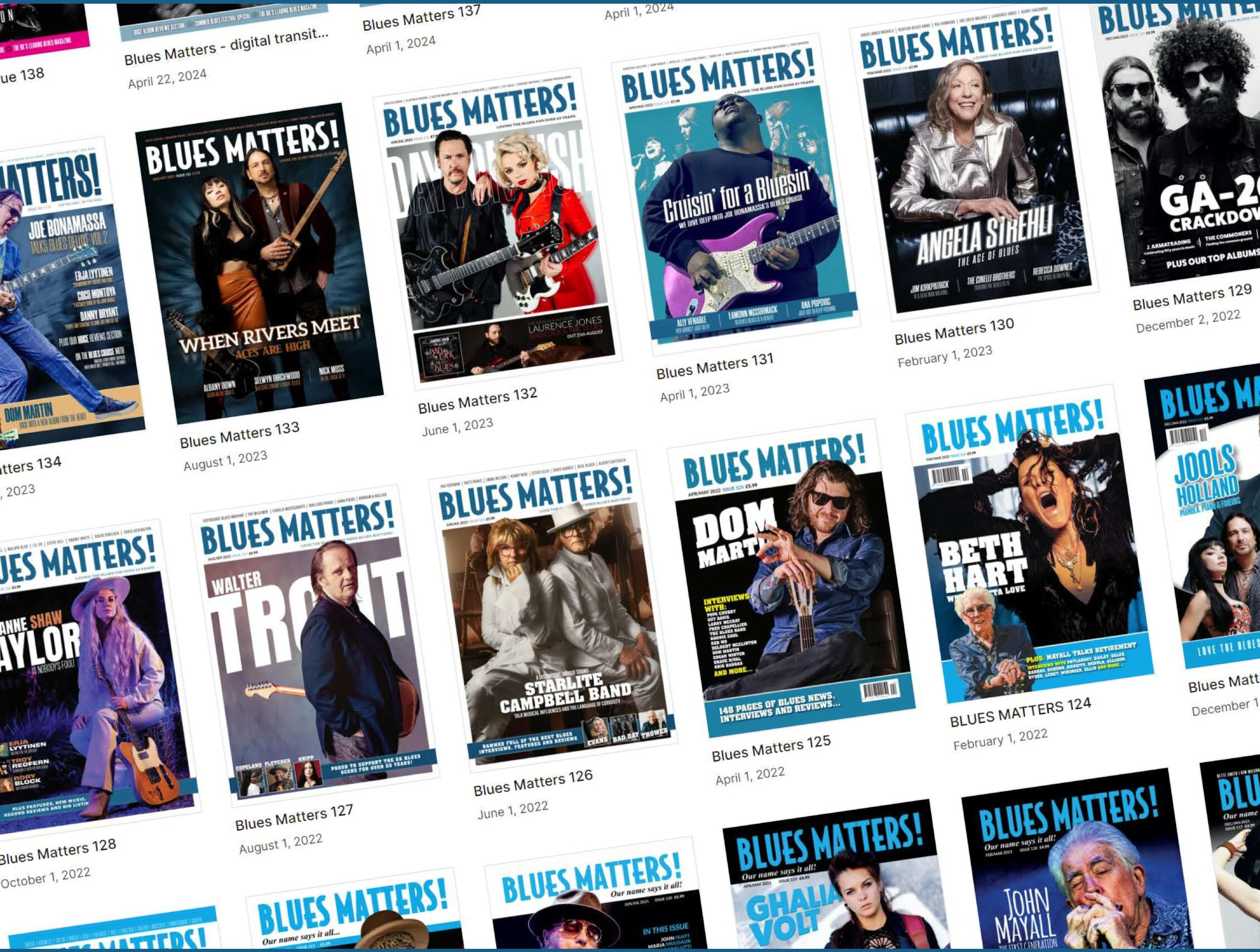
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DEAN ZUCCHERO

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BASS!

Colin Campbell Dale Gunnoe

Dean Zucchero, a bassist, songwriter, and producer, is a driving force in the contemporary blues and roots music scene. Known for his dynamic grooves and soulful presence, Dean has performed with an impressive array of artists, including Bobby Rush, Bill Sims Jr., and countless others who have shaped the modern blues landscape.

His musical style combines the raw energy of traditional blues with a fresh, innovative approach. In this interview, we explore Dean's inspirations, his career highlights, and the creative process behind his unmistakable sound and mostly discuss his new release Song For The Sinners.

THE ORIGINS: FROM CLARINET TO BASS

"Growing up, I always fantasised about being a musician," Zucchero begins. While his initial foray into music came through the clarinet, it was the allure of playing in a band that truly captivated him. "In 10th grade, I watched my friends jam together. My best friend was a drummer, and another was an advanced guitar player. One day, they said they needed a bass player. I didn't own a bass or know how to play it, but I told them I could."

With $35 borrowed from his mother, Zucchero biked across town to purchase his first bass and amp. That marked the beginning of his musical journey. "They taught me a few songs, The Ocean by Led Zeppelin, My Sharona by The Knack, and some Joe Jackson tunes. From there, I put in the hours, joined a band, and started playing gigs."

FINDING THE GROOVE

Zucchero's musical influences were as eclectic as his upbringing. From Elvis and The Beatles to Sinatra and the crooners his parents adored, his love for melody and rhythm was deeply rooted. "I'd listen to entire albums through those 70s pillow headphones," he recalls. "It was a nightly ritual that opened my ears to all kinds of music."

By the early 80s, Zucchero was performing live, with his first official gig taking place at Freeport's Long Island's The Right Track Inn. "Playing there was a rite of passage," he says. "We were in a band called Anastasia, writing songs, and dreaming of making it big. We soon hooked up with solid management and started playing legendary New York venues like The Bitter End."

A LIFE OF BLUES: NEW ORLEANS AND BEYOND

Zucchero's journey eventually led him to New Orleans, but not before an extended stint in Europe. "After leaving New York in 2005, I spent about nine years in Europe, ending up in Italy playing with pop swing bands. By 2013, it felt like time for a change. New York rents

“I’d listen to entire albums through those 70s pillow headphones”

“Everything I create comes from the bass”

Shine Shine
k a Little Wine
se Up Come
ack for More

were impossible, so I took a chance on New Orleans.”
Within a week of arriving, he secured a residency at a blues club. “That’s when I knew I’d found my next home,” he says. The move marked the beginning of a new chapter, immersing himself in the city’s vibrant blues scene and further refining his craft.

THE INSTRUMENT THAT DEFINES HIM

For Zucchero, the bass guitar is more than an instrument; it’s the foundation of his musical expression. “Everything I create comes from the bass,” he explains. “From melodies to harmonies, it’s all rooted in those grooves. A cool bassline can inspire an entire song.”

THE LEGACY OF GROOVE

For Zucchero, it’s always been about the music. Whether he’s slapping a funky bassline or crafting introspective lyrics, his dedication to the groove is unwavering. As he reflects on his career, he’s grateful for the journey that’s brought him from high school dances to the heart of New Orleans blues.

“Music was always in my blood,” Zucchero concludes. “And as long as I have my bass, the groove will keep going.”

SONGS FOR THE SINNERS: A NEW CHAPTER

Zucchero’s new album, Songs for the Sinners, is a testament to his evolution as a musician and storyteller. “It’s more focused than my previous work,” he says. “Every track was written within a year, unlike my first album, which was cobbled together over time. This one’s 100% my music, my production, and my arrangements.”

Tracks like “Lullaby” highlight Zucchero’s lyrical growth. “Last year was introspective for me, and it’s reflected in the stories I’m telling. I think the lyrics are the strongest I’ve ever done.”

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

Songs like Lullaby and Crawfish No More exemplify the ability to blend traditional blues elements with modern storytelling. Lullaby, draws inspiration from Where the Wild Things Are, exploring Freudian themes through Delta blues melodies. Meanwhile, Crawfish No More turns heartbreak into art, transforming communal traditions into metaphors for loss. “We aim to take listeners on a journey,” Dean notes, emphasising the importance of lyrical depth.

A VISION FOR MODERN BLUES

Zucchero emphasises his mission is to elevate blues with thoughtful songwriting and compelling narratives. “A lot of modern blues focuses on riffs and solos,” Zucchero observes. “We’re bringing the story back.”

ECLECTIC SOUNDS: A MUSICAL GUMBO

Dean’s latest album is a testament to his eclectic style. “You couldn’t just say, well, that’s blues or that’s jazz,” he explained. “It’s got your New Orleans gumbo.” True to the spirit of the city he calls home, his music weaves together blues, jazz, ragtime, and more. Tracks like Mama’s Bottle, displays this diversity, evoking the feel of a dark New Orleans rag with lyrics that could have been penned in the early 1900s.

“I love the blues, but I also try to venture out,” Dean noted, citing influences like the Allman Brothers. Their ability to seamlessly transition between blues and progressive instrumentals inspired him to embrace creative freedom. “It’s my music. I don’t have to answer to anybody except the audience.”

SEQUENCING THE JOURNEY

When asked about the album’s structure, Dean revealed his deliberate approach to sequencing. “It’s easy to write slow songs,” he admitted, “but I try to keep upbeat tracks in there too.” Balancing dark themes with lighter, more playful tunes, Dean meticulously arranged the album to provide a dynamic listening experience. The opener, Biting Through, sets a strong tone,” I spend time thinking about what I think would be the best sequence for the songs,” he said, emphasising the importance of flow.

ROAD TESTING AND REINVENTION

While most of the album hasn’t been road-tested, Dean shared that the tune, Lullaby had its debut last summer. Looking ahead, he plans to bring his songs to life in a live setting, potentially as part of a stripped-down singer-songwriter project.

“I’ll be playing the tunes on the bass, maybe with an accompanist,” he mused. This approach reflects Dean’s commitment to exploring new ways to connect with his audience. “It’s very rewarding listening to songs and thinking, okay, I like this. I think this is a good song.”

TRACK TALK

SOUTH SIDE

Dean Zucchero’s reverence for storytelling shines in South Side, a track inspired by the resilience of families navigating tough socio-political landscapes. Drawing inspiration from the iconic 1970s sitcom Good Times, the song weaves a narrative that’s both nostalgic and poignant. “It’s a nod to the strength of people who persevere,” Zucchero explains. The track evokes a soulful, late ‘60s vibe, paying tribute to those whose stories echo resilience in the face of adversity. “I started with a slap bassline, something I don’t usually do anymore. That groove evolved into a melody and, eventually, a full song with lyrics.”

SUICIDE FOR JESUS

Blues has always been a medium for confronting uncomfortable truths, and Suicide for Jesus is no exception. The song’s powerful narrative highlight’s themes of betrayal, religious hypocrisy, and the loss of innocence. “This isn’t an attack on faith but a critique of how some misuse it,” Zucchero clarifies. The haunting lyrics compel listeners to reflect on morality and accountability within sacred institutions, displaying the courage to address difficult subjects.

COLD SHOT

In contrast to the heavier tracks, this one offers a playful glimpse into adolescent infatuation, inspired by a magazine centrefold. “It’s cheeky, light-hearted, and undeniably fun, a bluesy homage to youthful fantasies.” The track’s catchy hooks and whimsical storytelling provide a refreshing counterbalance to the album’s darker themes.

NEVER FADE AWAY

For Zucchero, this deeply personal tune, stands as a tribute to his late mother. Inspired by a heartfelt note she left; the song blends poignant lyrics with an unexpected reggae groove. “It’s about hope and reunion,” he explains. The collaborative vocals of John Nemeth and Tiffany Pollack elevate the track into a universal anthem of love and remembrance.

TONE OF THE CITY

Capturing the spirit of New Orleans’ French Quarter, this is a love letter to the vibrant yet gritty essence of urban life. Zucchero’s vivid imagery transforms this track into a blues-rock anthem. “It’s about the magnetic pull of a place that’s as intoxicating as it is challenging,”

FOWL PLAY

Closing the album with a laugh, this features Little Freddie King in a tale of love lost, symbolised by a barnyard chicken. “It’s pure fun,” Zucchero says, describing it as a Zappa-esque blend of humour and blues. The track’s quirky charm leaves listeners smiling, proving that even the blues has room for comedy.

WORDS OF WISDOM AND PERSISTENCE

Dean's journey in music hasn't been without challenges. "The best advice I've heard," he shared, "is to keep pushing." Citing Bruce Springsteen's philosophy of striving for greatness, Dean underscored the value of patience and persistence. "Sometimes, I go two years without writing a song, and then in three weeks, I write a whole record," he said.

This persistence extends to his career's broader trajectory. "At some point, you realise you won't be the next Mick Jagger," he laughed. "You have to ask yourself: are you in it for the glory or the love?" For Dean, the answer is clear. "I'm in it for the love."

PRODUCTION AND COLLABORATION

Dean's passion for production is another facet of his artistry. Currently, he's working with a promising blues rocker, combining his vision with the artist's raw talent to create something remarkable. "Production is great," he said. "I want to keep doing it."

Looking ahead, Dean's schedule is packed. With his new album set to release in February and projects lined up through 2026, he remains committed to pushing his creative boundaries. "I'm planning ahead, writing songs that range from funk to Motown," he said. "It motivates me to keep exploring."

GRATITUDE AND GROWTH

As our conversation drew to a close, Dean expressed heartfelt gratitude to his fans. "Thank you to everyone who still appreciates the blues," he said. "It's the foundation of all American music."

With his unwavering dedication and boundless creativity, Dean Zucchero embodies the spirit of the blues while carving out his unique path. Whether performing in intimate New Orleans clubs or crafting songs for future generations, he remains a beacon of passion and persistence in the music world. For further information see website: www.deanzucchero.com

EXPLORE >

TYNESIDE AMERICANA BLUES FESTIVAL

Deborah Bonham

The Tyneside Blues and Americana Weekend made its debut in 2024 at the Cullercoats Club, marking the first time the area surrounding Whitley Bay, Tynemouth, and North Shields hosted such an event. Blues Matters Magazine was kindly invited and even contributed to selecting the bands that performed over the weekend.

✎ Stephen Harrison 📷 Ian Potter

Fast forward to 2025, and the festival has found a new home at The Exchange 1856 on Howard Street, Tynemouth. This new venue ushered in an exciting era of Blues and Americana, providing an unforgettable experience in an equally remarkable setting.

The Exchange 1856, a Grade II listed building, offers a versatile space that includes a VIP area, Brown's Restaurant, a coffee shop, a craft shop, and a stunning main room for music, theater, and entertainment. The venue is the brainchild of Stuart and Paul, longtime friends and business partners with a knack for spotting opportunities and adapting to evolving demands. Together, they've created a hub that caters to a wide range of cultural and social needs.

The weekend kicked off with a bang, as The Deborah Bonham Band headlined Friday night. Having seen this band perform several times and had the privilege of interviewing them, I knew the audience was in for a treat. Their set began dynamically with "See You Again," setting a high standard for the rest of the weekend. Known as one of the best acts on the Blues and Blues/Rock circuit, the band delivered a mix of original tracks and carefully chosen covers, leaving the crowd enthralled.

Saturday's events began in the afternoon with local favorite Stan The Band. This five-piece group, boasting a loyal following, leaned into their Blues/Rock influences, performing a set of original songs that were well-received by the crowd. Lead vocalist Colin Burrows, with his grav-

Ash Lynch

Stan the Band

STAN
THE BAND

King Sized Voodoo Traveller

Dr Feelguid

Tom Killner Band

Blues fans from Justin Guitar

Ian McNabb

The Terraplanes

THE TERRAPLANES
BL S BAND

The crowd watching the main stage

elly voice reminiscent of Bryan Adams, delivered a powerful performance alongside rhythm guitar. Dave Kennedy on lead guitar added a harder edge to the band's sound, perfectly meeting the crowd's energy. A fantastic opening act to kickstart the day.

The evening headliner was none other than The Terraplanes Blues Band from Bristol, whose high-energy Blues had the audience on their feet from the first note to the last. Closing out the evening was the legendary John Verity Band, delivering a performance that further cemented this event as an unforgettable experience. Saturday was a day of outstanding performances, leaving the audience with memories to cherish.

Regrettably, I had to travel home on Sunday morning and missed the final day's performances. However, knowing the stellar lineup, I am confident the day was incredible. The festival culminated with Rhino's Revenge, featuring John Edwards and Leon Cave driving the rhythm section. It's no exaggeration to say that the weekend ended on a high note.

This was my first experience at an event held at The Exchange 1856, and it won't be my last. Throughout the weekend, I spoke with staff and attendees who all shared the same sentiment: the venue provided an exceptional atmosphere and experience for everyone involved. Congratulations to all the organizers, performers, and supporters who made this event possible.

Blues Matters Magazine is already looking ahead to 2026, eagerly anticipating another incredible weekend featuring the finest Blues and Americana acts from near and far. Bravo to all involved—here's to keeping the Blues alive!

Gerry Jablonski Band

The Terraplanes

A beautiful, but cold morning

Photographer spotted in its natual habitat

Stan the Band

Ali Hasbach

STORYTELLER

JIMMY VIVINO

Jimmy Vivino, a renowned guitarist, singer, and bandleader, has spent decades as a cornerstone of the blues and rock music scenes. Best known as the musical director for Conan's house band, Jimmy Vivino and the Basic Cable Band, his career spans collaborations with legends like Levon Helm, Al Kooper, and John Sebastian.

Colin Campbell   As credited

With his deep passion for the blues and a unique ability to blend traditional roots with modern flair, Vivino's influence resonates across genres. In this exclusive interview, we dive into his musical journey, his love for the blues, and the stories behind the songs that shaped his life.

MUSIC AND GRATITUDE

As the calendar turns to a new year, many reflect on resolutions, hopes, and dreams. For blues guitarist Jimmy Vivino, it's about embracing gratitude. "My resolution is to not complain about the little things and just try to stay healthy," Vivino shares. After 26 years tethered to the "golden handcuffs" of a steady TV gig, Vivino now revels in the freedom to tour, meet fans, and create music; a life he cherishes deeply.

The transition hasn't dampened his enthusiasm for the simple joys of life on the road. "I love staying in Holiday Inns and having my bed made," he jokes. For Vivino, every gig and every journey are a chance to connect, both with audiences and his own musical roots.

A MUSICAL LEGACY PASSED DOWN

Vivino's passion for music runs in his blood, tracing back to his father, a talented trumpeter who immigrated from Italy in the 1930s. Despite his gifts, Vivino's father was never allowed to pursue music professionally, a fate he was determined not to impose on his sons. "He told me to pick between the hammer and the trumpet," Vivino recalls. "He didn't want to choose for me but said whatever I picked, I had to work hard at it."

This support gave Vivino and his brothers the freedom to explore their artistic paths. From dancing at the 1964 World's Fair to forming a New Jersey-based band in the early '70s, Vivino built a career grounded in dedication and an unshakable love for music. "It's been 58 years since my first band, and I've known nothing else but this life."

LIVING THE BLUES

For Vivino, the blues is more than a genre; it's a way of life. "The blues is the most honest form of communication," he says. This authenticity has driven him to champion blues legends, bringing artists like Jimmy Rogers, James Cotton, and B.B. King to mainstream audiences during his tenure on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien." "I'm proud to have had the opportunity to showcase these artists. It's about reminding people of the treasures in their own backyard."

Vivino's collaborations with icons such as Johnny Johnson and Hubert Sumlin hold a special place in his heart. Johnson, Chuck Berry's pianist, became a dear friend and mentor. "Johnny would cook enough food for an army and always remained unflappable, even in stressful moments," Vivino recalls fondly.

With Sumlin, guitarist for Howlin' Wolf, Vivino experienced a rare musical synergy. "Hubert once told me during a gig, 'Jimmy, you're feeling my mind.' That's the kind of connection we had. Hubert's playing was all heart and intuition."

HONOURING THE PAST, BUILDING THE FUTURE

From sharing stages with blues legends to introducing their work to new audiences, Vivino sees himself as a bridge between generations. He draws inspiration from the British Invasion artists who celebrated American blues, such as the Rolling Stones and John Mayall. "They taught us to appreciate what we had at home."

Now, Vivino's journey continues with undiminished energy. Whether recording with Canned Heat or hitting the road, his mission remains the same: to bring the blues to life and pay tribute to those who paved the way. "To me, the blues will always be about storytelling," he says. "It's real. It's honest. And it's everything I've ever wanted to share with the world."

TALES FROM THE JOHNNY JOHNSON BAND

Vivino's career has placed him alongside legends like Chuck Berry, Hubert Sumlin, and Jimmie Rodgers. He recalled a memorable encounter while performing with the Johnny Johnson Band: "We were backing up Chuck Berry, Jimmie Rodgers, Billy Boy Arnold, and Hubert Sumlin. I thought they'd harmonise perfectly, but they were as competitive as modern-day rappers!"

Billy Boy Arnold's refusal to back up Jimmie Rodgers epitomised the tensions. "Billy Boy said, 'He backs me up, not the other way around!' It was a crash course in the dynamics of musical legends," Vivino shared with a laugh. Yet beneath the rivalry lay mutual respect, reflecting the human authenticity that defines the blues. "It's like family bickering," he said. "Tense but rooted in love for the craft."

Danny Clinch

📷 Allison Morgan

“The blues is about soul not speed”

CHUCK BERRY: THE BLUEPRINT OF MODERN MUSIC

When it comes to Chuck Berry's influence, Vivino's admiration knows no bounds. "He's the bridge between blues and rock," he explained. "Berry's poetry paved the way for Bob Dylan, and his guitar style influenced every British Invasion band."

Vivino acknowledged the challenges Berry faced, particularly in navigating societal and racial adversities. "His experiences shaped his music, though he emerged from prison a changed man, his essence as a cultural pioneer never wavered."

THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE BLUES

Addressing the question of authenticity in "white boys playing the blues," Vivino dismissed the notion of exclusivity. "The blues isn't about race; it's about experience," he explained. "Suffering transcends boundaries. The Scots and Irish have their own blues because they've known hardship, too."

To Vivino, blues is a dialogue. "B.B. King taught me that the blues isn't about technical showmanship. It's about heart and connection, a shared experience among everyone on stage."

WORDS OF WISDOM FROM MUSICAL GREATS

Throughout his career, Vivino has gleaned invaluable lessons from luminaries. Al Kooper's advice to "find your own voice" resonated deeply. Similarly, Joe Walsh demonstrated the power of simplicity by plugging Vivino's guitar directly into an amp. "That pure sound taught me to strip away the gadgets and focus on the music," he recalled.

THE BLUES IN THE MODERN ERA

Vivino lamented the modern obsession with technical prowess over storytelling. "It's like quoting the dictionary instead of having a conversation," he remarked. "The blues is about soul, not speed."

Still, he acknowledged the genre's evolution, praising artists like Buddy Guy and Eric Clapton for injecting fresh energy while honouring tradition. "The blues can evolve," he said, "but it should never lose its soul."

A HUMBLE TENANT IN THE HOUSE OF BLUES

Despite his success, Vivino remains modest. "The blues is a house I didn't build," he mused. "I'm just renting a room, and I'm grateful they let me stay as long as I don't rearrange too much."

A PERSONAL BLUES JOURNEY

Vivino's latest album encapsulates his personal relationship with the genre. "It's my blues," he said. "The blues is a complaint set to music—whether about love or life. It's simultaneously personal and universal."

With humour, humility, and profound insight, Vivino's reflections underscore why the blues continues to captivate.

REDISCOVERING PURPOSE THROUGH MUSIC

Despite a career that could easily justify retirement, Vivino finds himself energized by the stage and the connection it fosters. "I don't golf, I don't fish," he admitted. "I'd rather go into the clubs, meet people, play, and make my music. That's the best part of living right now." For Vivino, the blues isn't just about performance; it's about forging bonds with audiences and sharing moments that transcend the music itself.

This renewed purpose has come with a shift in perspective. Having spent much of his career supporting other artists, Vivino relishes his role as a frontman, interacting with fans and creating memorable experiences. "I'm finding younger audiences coming out for the blues, just like we did when we first discovered it, if there are ten people there, I'm having a ball."

GONNA BE 2 OF THOSE DAYS

Vivino's album title, emerged after he dismissed the more clichéd 21st Century Blues, a nod to Steve Earle's song of the same name. The track, Blues In The 21st nonetheless dives into societal frustrations, a sentiment born during the COVID-19 pandemic. "It's about the experience of living today; even buying toothpaste requires unlocking a cabinet," Vivino quips, "At my age, I'm not shy about expressing how I feel." He laments the injustices he's witnessed, including outdated drug policies, and channels this into a politically charged yet humour-laced anthem.

A TIP OF THE HAT TO THE GREATS

Vivino's respect for blues legends is evident throughout the album. Tracks like Beware of the Wolf pay homage to Howlin' Wolf, while others, like the bluesy, psychedelic Ain't Nothing Going to Be All Right, echo the spirit of Bob Dylan. "Dylan's take on the blues always had a twist," he notes. Another standout, Going Back Up the Country, recalls a journey through Greenwich Village with John Sebastian, lamenting the loss of iconic venues to gentrification.

"Places we cherished are gone," Vivino reflects. "Clubs like Manny's Car Wash and the Lone Star Cafe succumbed to rising rents. Real estate has no conscience." His songwriting captures this nostalgia, blending personal memories with universal truths.

BLUES AS A PERSONAL CANVAS

While deeply rooted in tradition, Vivino's approach to blues is uniquely his own. "I can't write about cotton fields; that's not my story," he admits. Instead, he draws from personal experiences, using the blues' format to convey his narrative. He advises aspiring artists to approach covers thoughtfully, respecting the life experiences embedded in the originals.

One track, Fool's Gold, stands out as a bridge between past and present. Originally written over 30 years ago and first recorded with Catherine Russell, Vivino revisits the song with a fresh perspective. "My influences, from Bob Dylan and Van Morrison to the band, always find their way into my work," he says.

RUBY'S LEGACY AND OTHER INSPIRATIONS

Vivino's fascination with the recurring "Ruby" theme in music inspired Ruby Is Back, a track that blends elements of Cream's, Strange Brew. "Everyone has a Ruby in their life," he muses, describing the song's bittersweet exploration of irresistible yet flawed relationships.

Environmental themes also weave through the album, culminating in two acoustic tracks recorded during a final session with John Sebastian. Limited vinyl space means these songs will remain digital exclusives, but their raw, stripped-down essence captures the album's spirit.

THE SONGWRITING PROCESS

Vivino's songwriting is an intimate process, often beginning in the stillness of early mornings. "Lyrics come first, I'll jot down ideas in my notes or by hand, then refine them over time." Music follows, evolving as he experiments with rhythms and melodies. Vivino embraces collaboration, allowing band members to infuse their instincts into the arrangements. "I never tell my guys what to play," Vivino states. "Their soul is essential to the music."

A NEW ERA FOR BLUES

Vivino's partnership with Gulf Coast Records and Mike Zito marks a turning point in his career, providing him the platform to share his voice. "It's like Elvis in 1954," he laughs. "You've got your car full of records, selling them at gigs." Yet, for Vivino, the true reward lies in connecting with fans. "When someone says, 'I love your record, and asks for a signature, that's the last human touch in this process."

With his latest album, Vivino proves that blues—much like life itself—is ever-evolving, deeply personal, and endlessly resonant.

THE BLOOD BROTHERS AND NEW ADVENTURES

One of Vivino's latest endeavours is joining the Blood Brothers, a group featuring fellow blues icons Albert Castiglia and Mike Zito. This collaboration stems from years of camaraderie and shared musical journeys. "Mike and I have known each other since his Chuck Berry record days," Vivino shared. "We'd play together whenever our paths crossed."

The Blood Brothers project also has a unique twist, Bill Murray's involvement. Known for his comedic genius, Murray brings a laid-back charm to the group. "Bill doesn't act like a star," Vivino said with a chuckle. "He'll take selfies with fans and jam with the band. He just wants to have fun." This spirit of camaraderie makes the Blood Brothers more than just a band; it's a celebration of friendship and music.

PRESERVING AND EVOLVING THE BLUES

For Vivino, preserving the blues means honouring its roots while encouraging innovation. "The blues isn't about guitar solos, it's about groove, storytelling, and connecting with people. If it doesn't make you move, it's not worth it."
He also stressed the importance of exploring the genre's origins. "If you've mastered Stevie Ray Vaughan, go back and listen to Son House or Mississippi John Hurt. That's where the soul of the blues lies." Vivino's own journey reflects this philosophy. Whether he's drawing from the simplicity of John Lee Hooker or the fiery energy of Hound Dog Taylor, his performances are a testament to the genre's multidimensionality.

A GLOBAL CONVERSATION THROUGH MUSIC

Vivino's love for collaboration extends beyond borders. "When I travel, I want to play with local musicians," he explained. "It's about creating a worldwide conversation on stage." He's witnessed firsthand how blues unites audiences across generations and geographies. Recalling a festival in Ballyshannon Ireland, he marvelled at the diverse crowd. "Every age group was there, all open to good music. It was inspiring."

FINAL WORDS FOR BLUES ENTHUSIASTS

As our conversation ended, Vivino offered heartfelt advice. "To musicians, I say write every day. Express yourself lyrically and instrumentally. To the audience, continue your journey through the blues. It's omnidirectional. Explore its roots and let that inspire you."

For Vivino, the blues remains a dynamic and evolving art form. "We're just renting a room in the blues," he said with a smile. "We don't own it. But we can honour it, live it, and share it with the world."

Jimmy Vivino's journey is a testament to the enduring power of the blues. Through his music and mentorship, he continues to inspire a new generation of artists and fans alike. For Vivino, the road ahead is clear: keep playing, keep connecting, and keep the blues alive.

For further information see website: jimmyvmusic.com

EXPLORE

TOMMY CASTRO

CLOSER TO THE BONE

Tommy Castro is a celebrated blues guitarist, vocalist, and bandleader who has been captivating audiences for decades with his fiery performances and soul-stirring music. A dynamic storyteller with a signature sound that blends blues, rock, and soul, Castro has earned a reputation as one of the genre's most versatile and electrifying performers.

✎ Colin Campbell 📷 Laura Carbone & Dragan Tasic

With multiple Blues Music Awards to his name, including the coveted B.B. King Entertainer of the Year, he continues to push boundaries while staying true to the raw emotion that defines the blues. Ahead of his latest tour, Castro reflects on his journey, influences, and the enduring power of the music that drives him.

THE HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Tommy Castro, celebrated blues guitarist and singer, didn't always dream of becoming a professional musician. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he didn't watch The Beatles or Rolling Stones on The Ed Sullivan Show and immediately decided to pursue music. "I thought that was for somebody else, not me," Castro admits. Growing up in a working-class neighbourhood, the idea of making a living through music seemed unrealistic. Instead, music was a source of fun, a luxury indulged in during free time. His first exposure to live music came courtesy of his older brother, who played in a rock 'n' roll band. At ten years old, Castro would watch them rehearse in their mother's basement. Fascinated by the electric guitars, drums, and the blues-infused rock sound of the 1960s, Castro began sneaking his brother's guitar to teach himself how to play. "My brother would bribe me with guitar lessons in exchange for chores," he recalls with a laugh. Those early lessons laid the groundwork for a lifelong love of blues music.

DISCOVERING THE BLUES

During his teenage years, Castro was drawn to the bluesy undertones of rock 'n' roll, although he didn't initially recognise the genre's roots. "I thought Cream was just a rock band," he says. As he delved deeper, friends and album liner notes introduced him to blues legends like B.B. King, Muddy Waters, and Elmore James. "I'd read every detail on the records, that's how I discovered that songs written by Willie Dixon were first performed by these incredible blues artists."

One pivotal moment came when Castro purchased B.B. King's Live In Cook County Jail. "I wore that record out," he says. Inspired by King's mastery, Castro began mimicking his licks and developing his own guitar style. These formative experiences instilled a deep respect for the blues and its traditions.

THE LEAP TO A MUSICAL CAREER

Despite his passion, Castro didn't initially see music as a viable career path. That changed during a period of self-reflection in his twenties. "I realised that playing in bands on the weekends was the only thing that truly excited me," he shares. Deciding to pursue music full-time, Castro started performing with local bands, honing his craft and stage presence.

His big break came in the 1990s with the release of Right As Rain, a successful album that gained airplay on rock radio. Soon after, he received a career-defining opportunity: opening for blues legends B.B. King and Buddy Guy on tour. "Sharing the stage with them was surreal, I'd look to my right and see B.B. King; it was nerve-wracking and exhilarating." The experience not only validated his talent but also reinforced his commitment to the blues.

LEARNING FROM THE LEGENDS

Touring with B.B. King left a lasting impression on him. "He was incredibly kind and always made time for people. Watching B.B. interact with fans taught me the importance of humility and generosity as an artist. I carry those lessons with me to this day".

Another major influence was Buddy Guy. "Buddy's energy and showmanship were unmatched." Learning from these icons shaped his approach to performance and helped him evolve into a captivating frontman.

FINDING HIS STAGECRAFT

While Castro initially focused solely on his guitar playing, his time with the show band The Dynatones taught him the value of stage presence. "The band leader told me to walk to the front of the stage during solos and engage with the audience," he remembers. This simple advice transformed his performances. Today, Castro is known

for his dynamic stage presence and ability to connect with audiences.

CARRYING THE BLUES FORWARD

For Castro, the essence of blues lies in its ability to uplift and connect. "Playing the blues lets us relieve people of their troubles, even if just for a couple of hours," he says. After decades in the industry, he remains grateful for the mentors, fans, and experiences that have shaped his journey.

STAYING PRESENT IN THE BLUES

When blues legend Tommy Castro reflects on his decades-long career, one piece of advice stands out: "Be present." It's a simple yet profound mantra, deeply tied to his philosophy as a musician and performer. "When you're playing, it's easy to get in your head," Castro says. "You start thinking about what you're doing wrong or comparing yourself to others. But the best lesson I've learned is to catch myself when my mind wanders and bring it back to the moment."

This lesson was reinforced during a memorable encounter with Carlos Santana. "Carlos showed me a lick and said, 'Slow down. First, learn to play it slowly; your muscle memory will take over and you'll play it faster.' Then he added something I'll never forget: 'A note is like an old friend; you should visit it. Really play each note like you mean it.'"

NAVIGATING THE BUSINESS OF MUSIC

Beyond the stage, Castro acknowledges the challenges of navigating the music industry. "There's so much to learn, and it's always changing. My instincts are to focus on the audience and make records that hold up to the music I love," he explains. But promoting shows and music in the digital age can be daunting. "Thirty years ago, it was flyers and word of mouth. Now, there are countless ways to connect with audiences online, and you can't do it all. You have to find what works for you."

His advice for emerging artists is grounded in respect and commitment. "When someone gives you the opportunity to play at their venue, do everything you can to make it a success. Whether it's promoting the show or giving your best performance, you owe it to yourself and your audience."

THE EVOLUTION OF A BLUESMAN

Tommy Castro's recent albums showcase his refusal to be boxed into a formula. "My last album, The Bluesman Came to Town, was a concept album, a rock opera in blues form. It was a polished, carefully crafted story, and it did really well for us. But I never want to make the same record twice."

HIS NEW RELEASE

His latest project takes a starkly different approach. "We recorded at Greaseland Studios in San Jose, which is as funky and greasy as it gets," he laughs. "I wanted to make a traditional blues album; not contemporary or rock-blues, but real blues. Most of what you hear was recorded live in the studio with minimal overdubs. It's raw, authentic, and deeply rooted in the music's origins."

Castro's collaborators added unique textures to the record. "We had Chris Cain play piano on one track, and the Sons of the Soul Revivers provided vocal harmonies on a Ray Charles song. Instead of horns, we used voices for a fresh twist. My producer, Kid Andersen, brought genius-level creativity to the project."

The album also serves as a tribute to lesser-known blues greats. "I've always admired artists like Johnny Nitro and Ron Thompson, who influenced me but didn't get the national recognition they deserved. I recorded one of Nitro's songs and a track by Thompson as a way of honouring their legacy," he says. Castro also included a song by Bay Area bluesman Chris Cain, further highlighting the depth of regional talent. While the album draws from the past, Castro ensures it resonates with today's listeners. "I'm making a record like they did in the '50s, but it still sounds fresh. That's the magic of blues; it evolves while staying true to its roots."

ROAD TESTING THE BLUES

Castro is already introducing the new songs to live audiences. "We're playing three or four tracks from the album in our shows. It's unusual for me to perform new music before an album's release, but these songs feel right. I think blues fans will connect with them." For him, every note, every performance, and every project is a step forward in his journey as a bluesman. "The blues is about life's struggles and joys, and I want my music to reflect that. Whether I'm playing a classic cover or an original tune, it's all about connecting with the audience and staying true to the moment."

A PHILOSOPHY ROOTED IN EMPATHY

"What keeps you motivated?" I asked Tommy Castro, the blues maestro whose soulful guitar and vocals have touched audiences worldwide. Castro took a moment, then answered with heartfelt sincerity: "It's a blessing and a curse, but I feel like I have a lot of empathy." This natural empathy fuels his drive to spread positivity in a world often overshadowed by tragedy. "When I see what happens to people around the world; the difficulties, the horrific tragedies, it affects me deeply," he explained. "In order not to get down, I work at staying positive." Music is his way of balancing the scales. "Giving my all at a show to make sure everyone's having a good time; that's something I can do," he said. "We owe it to ourselves and to others to enjoy life when we can. Otherwise, the dark side wins."

SPREADING GOOD ENERGY

Beyond the stage, Castro's philosophy extends to lending a helping hand. "I'm not a rich guy," he admitted, "but if there's something I can do, I tend to say yes; especially when it comes to benefits and helping people in need." He believes in countering negativity with "good energy, good acts, and good actions." It's a mission that resonates deeply with his fans, many of whom look to his music for solace and inspiration. "Balancing out all the darkness with positivity is what keeps me going," he said.

A CONNECTION WITH THE UK BLUES SCENE

As our conversation turned to his connection with the UK, Castro's enthusiasm was palpable. "It's been a long time since we've been to the UK," he said, adding that plans to return are in the works for 2025. "The people in Britain have always been great blues followers." Castro credited the British invasion of the 1960s for bringing blues to a wider audience. "Where would we be if the British invasion never happened?" he mused. "Artists like B.B. King always acknowledged the role British blues musicians played in their success."

He also gave a heartfelt shoutout to friends and fellow musicians in the UK, including Aynsley Lister, Chris Mathews, Sari Schorr, and Todd Sharpville. "I hope we can connect and maybe even do some shows together when we come to town," he said.

LOOKING AHEAD

With his new release, Closer To The Bone, Castro is eager to hit the road. "There's talk about doing some dates in the UK this year," he shared. "We've got a tour in Europe with a week that still needs to be filled, so maybe we can squeeze in three or four shows."

As our interview wrapped up, Castro expressed his gratitude to the UK blues community. "Thank you for continuing to support the blues," he said. "We look forward to coming back. Hopefully, we'll see you in Edinburgh or somewhere else in the UK soon."

FINAL NOTES

Tommy Castro's blend of empathy, energy, and gratitude is a testament to his enduring appeal. Whether he's on stage or off, he embodies the spirit of the blues—a genre that, much like Castro himself, thrives on connection and resilience. For fans in the UK, his return promises to be nothing short of electrifying.

For further information see www.tommycastro.com

EXPLORE

GRETCHEN RHODES

Stephen Harrison Mariagoico

When Gretchen Rhodes sat down for an interview with Stephen Harrison, it was clear this was going to be no ordinary chat. From tales of her life in Maui to serendipitous encounters with rock royalty, the conversation revealed her passion for music and a deep connection to the legends who shaped her journey. Let's dive into Gretchen's world, where classic rock meets blues and innovation intertwines with homage.

EARLY LIFE AND MUSICAL BEGINNINGS

Gretchen's musical story began in the Midwest, where she was raised in a family steeped in music. "Both my parents have master's degrees in music," she shared. "My mother is the most beautiful alto ever, and my father is an amazing pianist and choir director." This foundation in classical music and hymnals developed into a love for harmony, something she'd carry with her throughout her career.

But it wasn't just classical and hymnal music shaping her tastes. By fifth grade, while her peers were swooning over New Kids on the Block, Gretchen was immersed in the sounds of Boston, Led Zeppelin, and Fleetwood Mac. "I was always a classic rock chick," she said with pride. Her brother played a pivotal role in introducing her to this rich musical landscape, nurturing her passion for bluesy rock.

Gretchen's early exposure to music was not just limited to listening. Growing up, she performed with an all-girls band, often covering Fleetwood Mac songs. Her high school performances, such as "Songbird," were a testament to her admiration for the iconic group. These formative years laid the groundwork for her future musical ventures.

A GLOBAL JOURNEY

Gretchen's travels took her far from her Kansas roots. After leaving at 18, she spent time in California, Jackson Hole, and the Caribbean, where she crossed paths with influential artists like Kenny Chesney. These experiences expanded her musical influences and honed her craft.

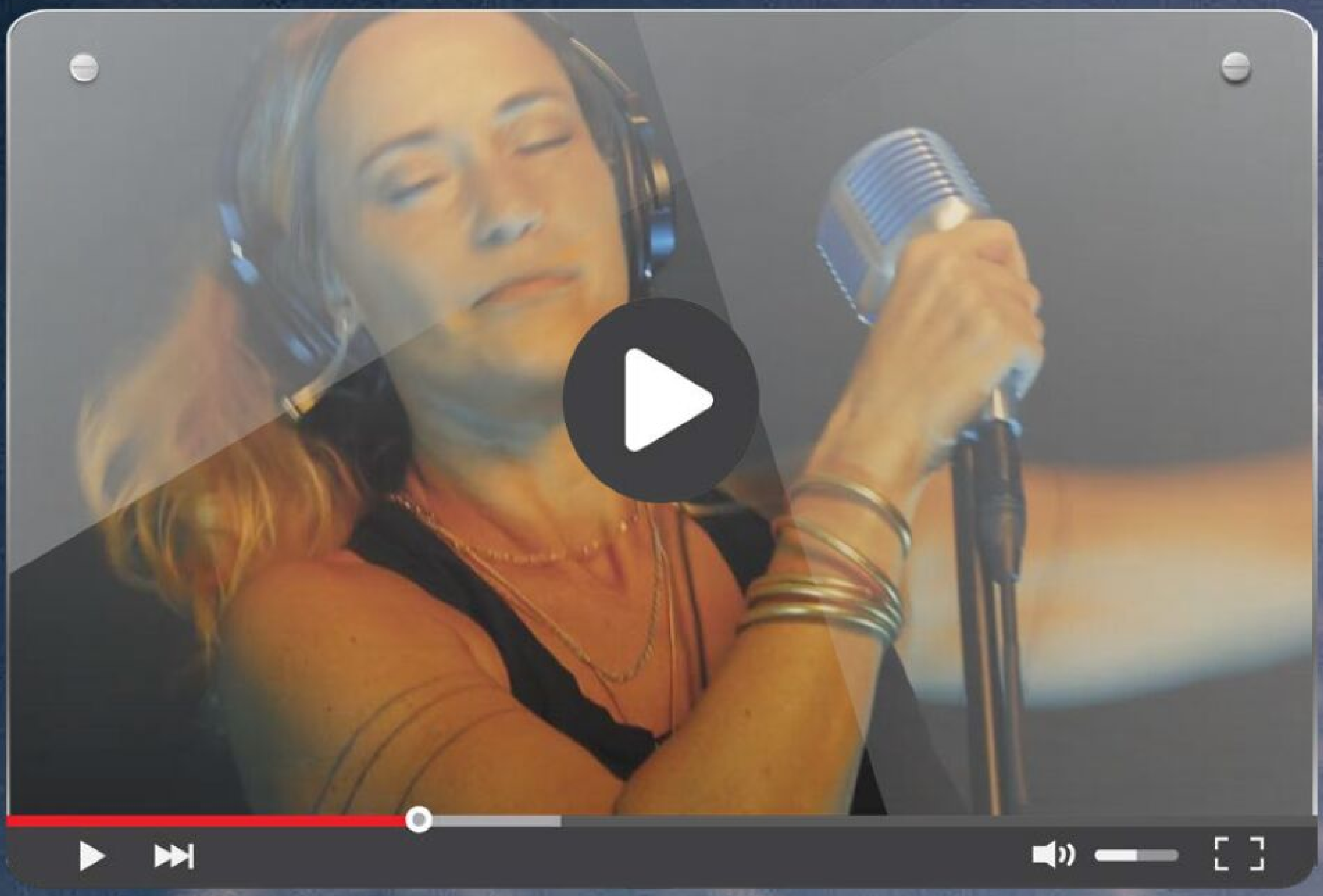
Ultimately, Gretchen found her way to Maui, where she's lived for nearly 20 years. Her life on the island marked a turning point, introducing her to new collaborations and opportunities—none more significant than meeting Mick Fleetwood.

Her move to Maui came with its own set of adventures. From adjusting to island life to encountering the vibrant local music scene, Gretchen embraced it all. "Maui has this incredible energy," she noted. "It's a place where creativity thrives."

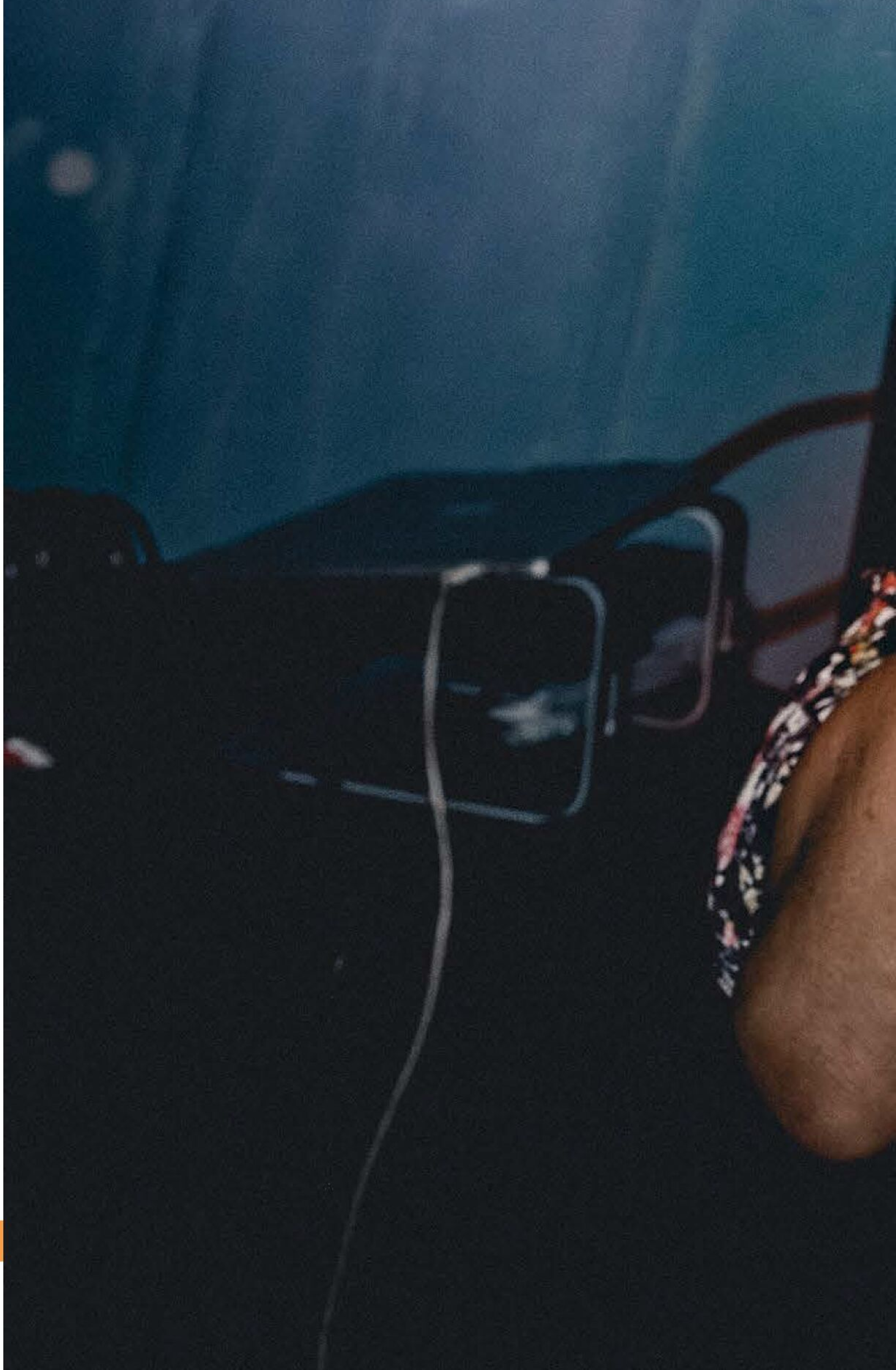
THE CHANCE ENCOUNTER THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Gretchen recounted the serendipitous day she met Mick Fleetwood in a Maui clothing store. "He's 12 feet tall and very distinctive," she laughed. At the time, she worked at a shop frequented by the likes of Carlos Santana and Alice Cooper. When Mick came in with his sister Sally, Gretchen's cheeky confidence made an impression.

"As he paid for a bright fuchsia shirt, I asked if he'd been doing anything musical lately. He launched



"BUT I HAD TO MAKE THESE SONGS MY OWN"



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“THIS ALBUM IS A TRIBUTE TO THE LEGENDS WHO SHAPED ME”

into one of his legendary shaggy dog stories, and I interrupted him, saying, 'If you're bored, I'd let you drum for me.'" That boldness led Mick to ask for a demo CD. Days later, she found herself at a band rehearsal and soon after performing with Mick at the Maui Arts and Cultural Centre. It was the beginning of a nearly two-decade-long musical collaboration.

The collaboration wasn't just about performance. Gretchen found a mentor in Mick, learning the nuances of the industry and gaining invaluable insights into the legacy of Fleetwood Mac.

The Influence of Fleetwood Mac and Peter Green

While Gretchen grew up idolising Fleetwood Mac, her connection to their original incarnation, Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac, developed later. Working with Mick and guitarist Rick Vito introduced her to Green's genius. "Rick was hugely influenced by Peter, and Mick held an enormous place in his heart for him," she explained.

Performing songs like "Black Magic Woman," "Oh Well," and "Rattlesnake Shake" became a regular part of her repertoire. Gretchen's soulful voice brought a fresh perspective to these classics, a feat she initially approached with a mix of trepidation and determination. "I wanted to pay respect to the songs while making them my own," she said.

Peter Green's influence extended beyond the music. His ethereal guitar tone and innovative style left an indelible mark on Gretchen's approach. "There's something otherworldly about his playing," she remarked. "It's a sound that's impossible to replicate."

BREAKING BARRIERS: A WOMAN'S TAKE ON ICONIC SONGS

As the only woman in the band, Gretchen had to carve out her space. "This is a man's world," she acknowledged, "but I felt these songs calling to me." Her unique renditions, infused with her bluesy rock sensibilities, won over Mick and the band. Even legendary Aerosmith frontman Steven Tyler, who occasionally sat in on performances, appreciated her interpretations.

Her boldness didn't stop there. When Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks heard Gretchen's take on "Black Magic Woman" during a rehearsal, she was inspired to include the song in Fleetwood Mac's tour setlist. "She even asked for my revised lyrics and a recording to learn from," Gretchen revealed. It was a surreal moment of recognition and validation.

The Birth of the "Peter Green Chicken Shack" Album

Gretchen's latest project, Peter Green Chicken Shack, is a heartfelt homage to the legendary guitarist. The idea was born out of years of performing Peter's songs and recognising his underappreciated influence. "I wanted to pay respect to Peter, Mick, and Christine McVie," she said. "Christine's passing, in particular, added a sense of urgency."

The album, recorded in a literal shack in the Maui jungle, took seven years to come to fruition, partly due to Mick's Fleetwood Mac commitments and the pandemic. Produced by Terry Brown, known for his work with Smashing Pumpkins, the project is a labour of love. "It's a vinyl of respect," Gretchen said, "to Peter, Mick, and the incredible legacy they've created."

The project's title reflects its roots. "Peter Green Chicken Shack" symbolises both the physical location of the recording and the musical legacy it honours. "It's about celebrating the journey and the people who made it possible," she explained.

HONOURING CHRISTINE MCVIE AND FEMALE BLUES ARTISTS

Gretchen's admiration for Christine McVie shines brightly in her work. "Christine's voice was magic, and her songwriting doesn't get the credit it deserves," she remarked. Her decision to include Christine's Chicken Shack tracks was a deliberate choice to highlight a trailblazing female artist in a male-dominated industry.

Gretchen and Mick Fleetwood

"In 1967, being a white blues chick writing and performing in a world full of men was no small feat," Gretchen said. "I wanted to honour that strength and creativity."

Christine's influence extended beyond her music. Her resilience and ability to thrive in a challenging environment inspired Gretchen to push boundaries. "She paved the way for so many women in music," she said.

LIFE, LEGACY, AND LOOKING AHEAD

Reflecting on her journey, Gretchen is deeply grateful for the opportunities that have come her way. "Mick has changed my life," she said. "The people I've met, the stages I've performed on, it's all because of that chance encounter 19 years ago."

Despite the challenges of balancing family life and a demanding career, Gretchen remains focused on her passion for music. She hopes to bring Peter Green, and Chicken Shack to audiences worldwide and dreams of collaborating with other artists who share her love for blues and rock.

A VOICE FOR THE AGES

Gretchen Rhodes' journey is a testament to boldness, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to her craft. From her Midwest roots to the jungles of Maui, she's carved a unique path in the music world. With Peter Green Chicken Shack, she honours the past while forging a future that's entirely her own. And as she continues to break barriers and breathe new life into classic songs, one thing is certain: Gretchen Rhodes is a voice to be reckoned with.

EXPLORE

Sean M Hower (left and down)

Big Blues Bender
EST 2014
LAS VEGAS
NEVADA

The Big Easy Cruise: Celebrating the Magical Spirit of New Orleans

Anita Schlank Laura Carbone

Music-themed cruises are currently very popular, whether they are focused on the blues, country music, 80's rock, 70's rock, or disco. But there seems to be only one cruise that does not limit itself to any one musical genre, instead capturing all aspects of the culture of the most dynamic location in the United States—New Orleans.

The Big Easy Cruise is a collaboration between Star Vista Productions and AJ Gross (Founder and CEO of the Big Blues Bender in Las Vegas). Although not from New Orleans, Gross has a special affinity for the area. "The Big Blues Bender has always celebrated New Orleans culture by having a second line year after year, and I love what we're doing here. It's not just rehashing what we do at the Bender. It's creating a new thing. It's different and special, with a combination of genres. It's like all kinds of stuff thrown in the pot to make a hell of a musical meal!"

The 'second line' referenced by Gross is a celebratory parade in which a brass band leads a group of dancing people. It is often seen at weddings, funerals or other special events and is considered a key part of African American culture. The second annual Big Easy Cruise recently left port in Fort Lauderdale for a seven-day celebration of Louisiana's unique offerings, beginning with a second line led by Jimmy Carpenter (Music Director of the Big Blues Bender) and the Bender Brass Band (who impressively backed up all the artists-at-large). Carpenter lived many years in New Orleans and has fond memories of the camaraderie of the people who lived there. "When Katrina happened, everybody worked together. Everybody helped each other out. It's a beautiful city. It's not an easy place to live, and if you live there you go through a certain number of challenges all the time. But everybody pretty much feels it's worth it." Carpenter also loves the

EASY CRUISE

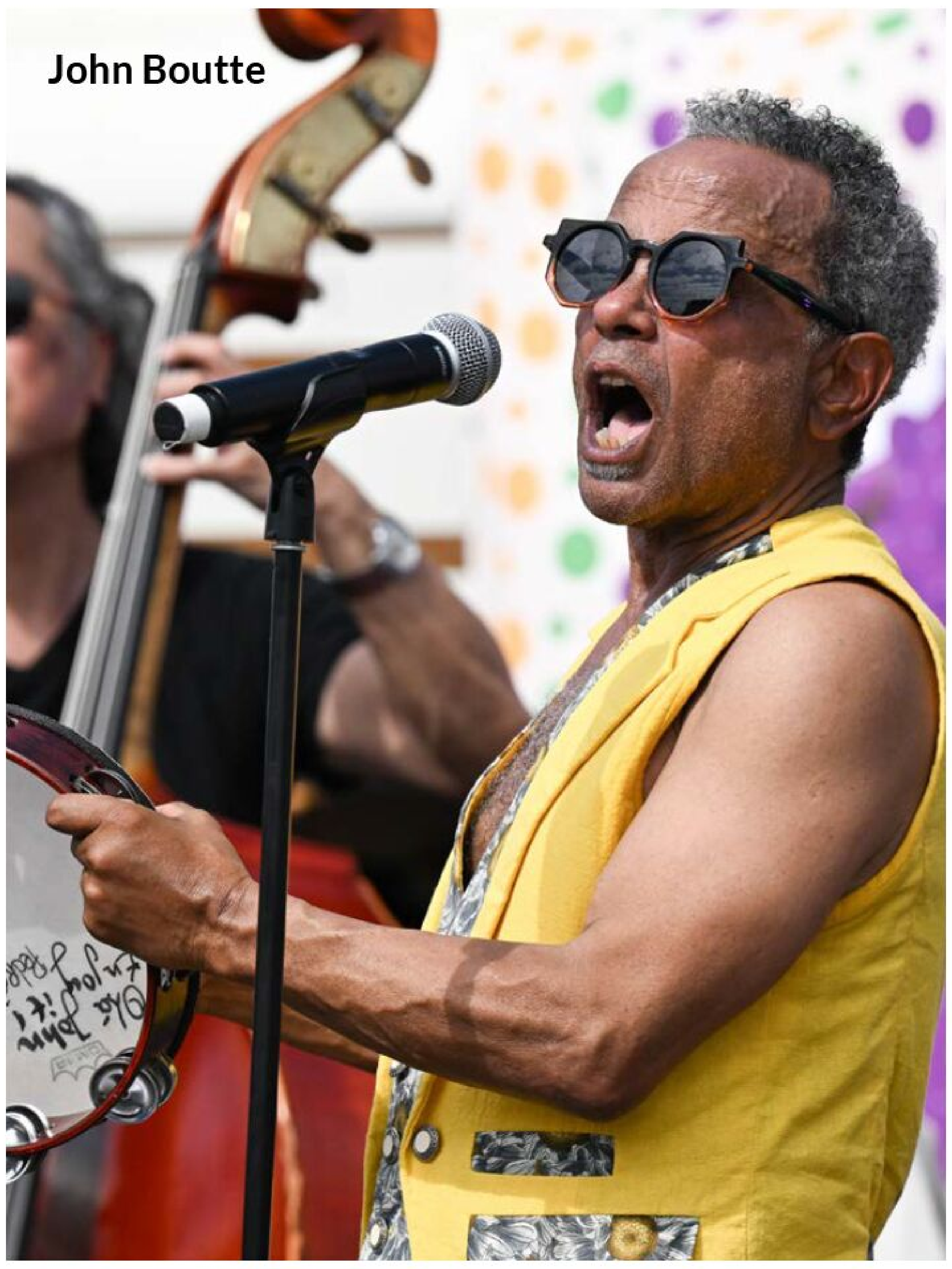
Jimmy Carpenter

Annika Chambers & Paul DesLaurier

Johnny Sansone

Tab Benoit

Trombone Shorty



John Boutte

Erica Falls & Vintage Soul

Minx Burlesque

Sugaray Rayford

Sierra Green & The Giants

John Cleary & The Absolute Gentleman

varied forms of music. "It might sound like a cliché, but New Orleans is like a gumbo pot, with so many different influences. Nothing is neatly defined in New Orleans. You mix it up, with R & B, Jazz, Blues and Rock 'n' Roll."

Mixing up R&B, Jazz, Blues and Rock 'n' Roll is exactly what makes New Orleans native, Trombone Shorty, stand out as one of the most creative artists on the cruise. His energetic melding of genres packed the largest venue on the ship. And the Soul Rebels offered a slightly different take on that same combination of genres. Erica Falls offered some vintage soul singing, while up-and-coming New Orleans artist, Sierra Green, (who was a new name to many on the boat), demonstrated a talent that many happily found to be reminiscent of Irma Thomas' soulful style.

Capturing more of New Orleans culture than simply the music, The Big Easy Cruise also featured Chef Kevin Belton who taught cooking classes and shared stories. Additionally, his recipes were featured on the ship, including jambalaya and beignets. New Orleans also has a vibrant and active burlesque scene, and Minx Burlesque demonstrated this uniquely entertaining (and erotic) art form, accompanied by the Bender Brass Band.

Jazz and soul singer, John Boutte demonstrated a diverse singing style clearly influenced by the spirit of New Orleans, while Mardi Gras Indians, Chief Monk Boudreaux and his grandson, J'wan Boudreaux, transfixed the audience with not only their vocal abilities, but the stunning visual images of the sequins, beads, patches and feathers in their intricately designed ceremonial regalia.

The magic of Louisiana is not solely limited to New Orleans, but extends to surrounding areas, as well. This was clearly demonstrated by Lafayette native Dwayne Dopsie, who showed those on board why he was nominated for a Grammy for his high energy Zydeco music. And from nearby Houma, Tab Benoit's blues continued to be a crowd favorite. Benoit noted that, in Louisiana, it seems as if everyone is a natural musician. "It seems like people come out and you give them an instrument and they can just play. That's how I grew up. It just seems normal to me. Not being able to play music doesn't seem normal. Everybody seems to be musical, and all these musical ideas come from all over the planet. It really is like a gumbo. They say it's in the water—maybe it is in the water." Like some of the other musicians, Benoit seemed to struggle to articulate exactly what makes "Swamp Blues" different from other blues, but noted, "whatever the swamp feels like—I'm trying to put that feeling into sound."

Although not natives, pianists John Cleary, Macia Ball, and Joe Krown have called New Orleans their home for decades and offered different interpretations on the instrument that is so important to the New Orleans sound. Other transplants to New Orleans, Johnny Sansone and Anders Osborne, would never live anywhere else. Sansone explained, "There is a certain kind of syncopation and timing that you don't find anywhere else in the world. It's kind of laid back, behind the beat, but pushing the beat. It's served with a certain amount of grease. It's slippery. It takes a long time to understand this. To get that grease on you--that takes a number of years. And once it's on you, it never comes off. Once you become a musician in the city of New Orleans you will always have that, and you can't find it in any other city."

It wasn't an absolute requirement to be from Louisiana to be included in this all-star lineup, and the audience was thrilled to have the opportunities to witness the talent of soul-blues artists Sugaray Rayford, Annika Chambers and Paul DesLauriers. But two of the most special moments of the cruise did come from a beloved member of New Orleans' musical royalty. Cyril Neville, (from the Neville Brothers, The Meters, and Royal Southern Brotherhood), brought a kind of ethereal magic any time he joined an artist on stage. When asked about one particularly memorable moment, he explained that "the spirit just took over" when he and J'wan Boudreaux joined Trombone Shorty on stage for a song that uplifted the audience and caused even non-dancers to move. And a pin drop could be heard in the Ocean Bar when Neville mesmerized the audience by joining Joe Krown for a song. Neville has noted that he believes the music and culture of New Orleans has helped many musicians rise above difficulties. And Neville succinctly summarized the power of New Orleans music, noting "If there is music on Mars, you know New Orleans music influenced it!"

There were so many gifted musicians on board, only a few could be mentioned in this brief article. Want to experience this uniquely genre-transcending cruise for yourself? Check out https://bigeasycruise.com.

Cyril Neville

MONUMENTAL

TAJ MAHAL

Paul Davies Supplied

As monumental in the blues scene as his adopted name suggests, at the venerable age of 82, Taj Mahal (Henry St. Claire Fredericks Jnr.) continues the heritage of his music ancestors with a missionary passion to entertain and educate audiences in the beautiful possibilities of blues music.

He has incorporated a panoply of world music styles into his oeuvre of recordings. From Hawaiian, African and Caribbean influences and what is now termed as World Music, Taj has flung open the doors of his musical palace and decorated his discography with a widescreen welcoming of styles and he isn't anywhere near done yet in pushing the boundaries of the blues. He's recently released the inspirational Swinging Live At The Tulsa Church which prompts this interview as I zoom into a black circular Ray Ban shades wearing Taj Mahal as he relaxes in sunny Florida just prior to heading out on another Blues Cruise from Fort Lauderdale: "It's my thirty ninth time or something like that," he firmly declares with a broad smile.

We embark on the subject of his current album which is recorded at the studio started by his old friend Leon Russell: "Well, my association, first of all, is that I always have lots of music and the way the business is these days, an artist that has a career like mine oftentimes is hidden in plain sight," he asserts. "The industry's moved on from being a group of people who love music and put the music out and share it to a bunch of people, to those who only know about making money from music. So, they really have no cultural significance in that paradigm." He explains: "After the major labels that I was on, all the music that has come out has been on independent labels. I have a great sextet going and I had heard about this studio and was asked if I was interested in recording a project there? I thought it would be great to have a live audience in the church for an excellent sound." He adds: "I did know Leon Russell back in the 60s, we were connected, and somewhere along in the 2000s we were on a project that T Bone Burnett put together, and I hadn't seen him in a long time. Anyway, there's a wonderful bronze statue of Leon in front," he says beaming his huge smile. "The possibility of being in a great sounding hall to record live music was what really excited me about going there, and so we did and got a deal to put it out and here we are."

Taj is one of life's great talkers, thankfully, with an insatiable appetite to relate his experiences in the music business and with musicians as I enquire if his sextet are well drilled when it comes to a setlist: "Well, they're always that way. I mean, the guys that played with me for the longest, they know what it is. People always say, 'Oh, how do you know'?" His reply is: "Well, you can hear what you know. Hear where it goes in terms of what I started out playing in the song is different every night, but there's a similarity to different songs and different chords that I'm going to play this song and sometimes there's a lead in that tells everybody where we are going and what key we're in." So, no prepared setlist keeps the live experience just that. Swinging Live At The Tulsa Church has been nominated for a Grammy and Taj has four wins already under his blues belt as he details: "My first nomination came for Sounder, in 1972/3, and to get to do what you want to do with music and play it the way you want to and be able to make a living at it...you're asking for a lot," he states with a disarming matter of fact directness.

There's a genuine honesty and gratitude for the hard yards he's put into his music that's paying off. He shares constant shouts outs to contemporary musicians and those who have gone before him as we talk about a lifetime of musical adventures including Rising Sons in which he played with Ry Cooder: "My life has been one great adventure, my dear man, and it didn't just start with Rising Sons. That was when I came to California," he confirms. "I came West to play with Ry Cooder because Ry was one of the guys who heard the music, acknowledged it for what it is and took the template and put himself in there because that's what the deal is. Just copying the music is what you do in the beginning when you're trying to learn it. But the cardinal rule is, you must put your voice inside the music and create something that is you with the music" Taj reveals more about his formative experience with music: "The music started for me back in the forties when I was in single digits; probably before that when I was in utero!" He expands upon his train of thought: "Both my parents were musical. My mother sang a lot, she was a schoolteacher who eventually ended up with a master's degree in education. My father was self-taught in terms of education and in terms of music he was a classically trained Caribbean piano player who played all the music from bebop and swing jump band music," Taj reminisces with pride. "I got to hear all that when I was growing up in single digits along with smatterings of this kind of music and that kind of music. I became very interested in the folk style of music." He further and impressively reels off a list of blues artists that would fill a whole library with recordings.

As with many American Blues artists, Taj was taken by surprise by the British Blues Boom that grew from mainly working-class kids in the UK. He later appeared on The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus extravaganza as he tells me: "It was quite exciting, and it was also a puzzle. How is it that in the middle of the night I hear this guy, this group, and it wakes me up because it's intense and has obviously learned what the real value of American music is, particularly music from the South and the blues? And it turns out to be Van Morrison singing in this band called Them and the song is called Gloria," he exclaims with amazement upon first hearing this original Belfast blues belter. "It took me a while to kind of understand that the young British musicians were trying to find something that represented how they actually felt. And they found it in the blues." Taj continues: "After World War Two, you guys were under some serious austere measures." He elaborates: "I was looking at a thing with Bill Wyman the other day, and he was talking about ducking into an air raid shelter when the German aircraft was strafing the streets and seeing Spitfires trying to take out the German bombers going overhead. The British Empire was changing."

"They were retracting their tentacles from all the places they had been around the world and the war really hit them hard. So, the young people coming up in that environment, bombed out London, bombed out Liverpool and Birmingham, wherever the German dropped bombs, you had to come back from that, and the only thing that is going to work for that situation is the blues and nothing else." I resist the urge to hail hallelujah at Taj's succinct summation of the origins of this youth moment as he continues: "But at the time when they were coming out with it, I started listening to the skiffle bands. I was a radio kid. I listened to the radio a lot, particularly at night. I even built myself a crystal radio set to hear music at night, because you hear stuff that didn't play during the day." He furthers: "I started hearing these skiffle bands and I wondered how can they 3000 miles away from me know this stuff? Where did they hear it because they were playing a lot of tunes, I didn't know. I eventually found out that with record companies, if you found out about some music, you could write to them, and they would send them to you in the mail. I never got a record in the mail until Catch A Fire came mailed to me from The Wailers and I was a well grown man by then!"

It would be remiss not to touch upon a full circle occasion between Taj and Ry with 2022's Get On Board winning the Best Traditional Blues Album Grammy award as he reveals further details of their musical partnership: "I've always held that man in high esteem. Like I said, I came out to California because I heard him teach some other guy and if he could teach him, if he was as young as he was teaching some guy who was a few years older and I reckoned this kid must be somebody I was looking for," he recalls. "I didn't want to play music that sounded like something, I wanted to come up and create and figured as a bunch of guys together we could create a new sound in this music. Of course, we ran into the whole studio band thing as The Wrecking Crew was picking all the records in California, and that's what they wanted to do. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want somebody to come in and make my record, and then I go out and play what they put out there."

Taj Mahal's independent streak continues to blaze a radical trail, backed up by his unique musical skillset. It's worth reminding that he previously scooped up another Grammy award in 2018 for his collaboration with Keb Mo on the TajMo album: "I was the one that came to him and said, 'man, we need to do a record together'. He's definitely one of my disciples. I mean, for about twenty-five years, there was nobody out there playing and listening to the same kind of stuff I was. I'm comfortable with young people out there who say I was amongst the people that inspired them to do what they did." Taj has one further surprise in store as he reveals to Blues Matters Magazine: "Whether you know it or not, there's a second TajMo album coming out. It's called Room On The Porch, and it drops in March, maybe April. We'll be out touring in June. The record's been done for a while now. So, yeah, we're back at it again."

DOIN' FINE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HAMMOND

In June 1973 John Hammond played a two-night solo stand at the 150-capacity Boarding House club in San Francisco. It wasn't the first time he'd performed there. Though born and raised in New York City - where his father John Hammond Jr, was one of the most influential men in the music business, signing and working with Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Pete Seeger, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan and many more - Hammond began his blues career alone in California in 1962, and this was a venue he knew well.

Sylvie Simmons **Licensed through Getty Images**

What he didn't know, until the recent release of the excellent three-CD live box-set You're Doin' Fine: Blues At The Boarding House, was that the soundman Owsley Stanley had recorded both of these shows.

Stanley was a legend on the San Francisco scene himself. The late chemist and visionary who supplied the counter culture with the purest, most powerful LSD was also an exceptional sound technician who worked with the Grateful Dead and had a habit of hitting the recording button to make what he called "Sonic Journals" of shows. Hammond seems quite delighted that his shows were among them. He says he was always more comfortable making live albums than studio recordings because "I feel more energised from the reaction of the crowd". He was unaware of being recorded at the Boarding House, he says, "but I was aware that the sound was good. I was on that night." In his eighties now and living in New York - "I always return to New York, New York is home" - he says that all he's doing right now is "a good job of putting my feet up."

You left New York for California to be a bluesman. Was the early '60s New York blues scene, like the folk scene, more purist and intellectual than what you had in mind?

"In New York there was so much music. New York was known as a jazz town, that's where most of the important jazz clubs were. It wasn"t particularly known as a blues venue area. In the West Coast they were more wide open, and everything is much more spread out. There were pockets of areas with blues venues on the West Coast. You could stay there and work your way back down from Seattle to San Diego and didn't really have to travel beyond there because there was enough work. I love travelling and going all over, so my world opened up early on.

The first time you saw a blues musician play live was when your father took you, when you were seven, to see Big Bill Broonzy?

"I can remember it to this day, It impressed me deeply."

Did it cause you to favour rural acoustic blues over electric blues?

I heard a lot of 'folk blues', as it was called early on. There were venues where you could hear Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee and Josh White. But I also loved electric blues. I liked Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry and all the more electric blues/R&B kind of stuff that was happening in the '50s and '60s. And I was hearing artists like Eric Clapton, Michael Bloomfield and Duane Allman and these guys who could knock your socks off. I didn't feel I was as good as them, I felt my strongest suit was as a solo musician, and in terms of what I like to do I felt very at ease.

Bob Dylan, whom you knew personally, came in for stick when he played an electric set at the Newport Folk Festival.

I was on various gigs with Bob and we used to hang out and exchange ideas. I put this band together to record - well the band was already together, I'd met them in 1963 in Montreal, and I would go to their gigs and they'd go to mine. They were in New York to try to get a record deal. I got us a recording date and I invited Bob to the session and he came and I introduced him to Levon [Helm] and Robbie [Robertson] and the guys. And he was very impressed. The next thing I know he was working with them. And recording with them. And there they were at the Newport Folk Festival!

Didn't Bob Dylan bring Johnny Cash to see you play at a club in New York?

Johnny Cash was a big fan of Bob's. He was going through a lot of changes. Bob brought him to hear

“HE MAKES THINGS COME ALIVE AS HE PERFORMS

me play at the Gaslight Cafe. It was a funky place. There was a little changing area behind the kitchen with a naked light bulb hanging down and that was the only light back there. So Bob brings Johnny to my show, at the end of the show they come back to this weird little area. Johnny Cash was really stoned. He walked right into the light bulb and broke it and we were in complete pitch darkneness. [Laughs]. Which was a bit awkward to say the least.

Another person who crossed your path in NYC was Jimi Hendrix. Did you two play together?
I gave him a gig as my lead guitar player at the Cafe A GoGo. It was or a week and we knocked everybody out. Chas Chandler of the Animals was there every night and offered Jimi a plane ticket and a recording date in England. So he was discovered playing with me.

Back to the Boarding House box-set. Your opening act on both those nights was a young Tom Waits, whose shows Stanley sadly did not record. What did you make of Tom? Had you met him before?
I had not. Tom was an amazing artist. In 1973 he was forming his own persona. He was just wide open, incredibly talented. I was on a show with him a couple of years later where I got to know him. This was in Arizona, and his show was so dynamic, so incredible that I didn't want to go on stage after him. He's an incredible performer. He makes things come alive as he performs. Aamazing shows.

When Tom won the Best Folk Album Grammy for his album Mule Variations in 1999, he said something along the lines of it suiting him better than his Alternative Rock Grammy but he'd prefer to be acknowledged as a blues artist. Did you two talk about the blues when you tecorded your album Wicked Grin with him?
I know that he loved blues and I know that one of his idols was Howlin Wolf. Such a dynamic perfomer Tom too. I would call Tom blues but I would also call him jazz and a poet. He could do it all.

As our interview draws to a close, conversation returns to the Boarding House box-set. One reason why Hammond was so “knocked out” by it was that it's his first-ever box-set in a six-decades career. But another likely reason is that these days Hammond, isn't on the road, playing. “I'm not touring any more”, he says. “I'm not performing.” So having some of his fine early performances on National guitar and harmonica appear out of nowhere has got to evoke some feelings. But for now he says he's looking forward to the publication some time this year of his biography, written by his wife Marla. “And there's a Canadian film maker that's doing a documentary on me. It looks”, Hammond says with a laugh, “like I'm still happening.”

SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT

FOSTER & ALLEN

Paul Davies Supplied

As the traditional Irish music Ying to Tony Allen's more contemporary leaning Yang, Mick Foster's roots in Irish folk accordion music grow deeper as the years pass by as detailed on Foster and Allen's 50 At 50 new album release. It celebrates this evergreen duo's indefatigable passion for Irish Folk music with some surprising crossover moments to boot. There are also fourteen new tracks which equates to a whole album's worth of music alongside familiar classic tunes that are staples in this pair's concert setlist.

Eschewing the new-fangled medium of zoom, I'm speaking with a chipper Mick Foster on an old fashioned conference call from his nearby rural Irish farmstead which has been a bit battered by recent storms the seriousness of which he relates to me: "There's no electricity, as we speak, but we have water, all right, but we have no power and we have no heat. We have an open fire. But you'd be sitting there in the dark like it was seventy years ago." This sparks an old flame of a memory: "I remember before we had electricity, I'm that old." He adds: "We still burn peat, sticks and coal. All the new houses now, they don't have a fireplace, or a chimney, so they're in serious bother." Thus, confirming that there's a warming comfort and refuge in the traditional ways of doing things, as much is similarly true with music in which this duo excels.

With the fresh release of their 50 At 50 album celebrating fifty years in the music business, I ask if they are amazed at reaching this milestone with a glorious career behind them: "There's nobody more surprised than we are. To survive the last fifty years in this business intact... There have been other groups in Ireland that have been longer on the road than us, but they haven't the same line-up," he observes. "We started together in 1967 in different groups and stuff, then, in 1975, we started out as Foster and Allen." There was an already well-trodden circuit for the duo to pad down and take their chances as he tells me: "We would play on the live circuit in the pubs and clubs in Ireland. And then we used to go over to England to the Irish Centres in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and the pubs and clubs in London." Their hard work on the road finally paid off with a Top 20 British chart hit: "Then Bunch Of Thyme got into the British Top 20 in March '82 and that opened up a whole new world for us." And there's more: "In 1983 Maggie went to number one in Australia and New Zealand, and that opened up another market. Also, I Will Love You All My Life was a hit in South Africa. And then we had success in mid Canada, Western Canada, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland," this maestro of the accordion proudly states.

There's a deeply rooted heritage of accordion music in Ireland and Scotland and the historical demographic of these far flung places has ancestral ties back to these homelands which, I suggest, is why musicians of their high calibre discover success over there".

"Without sounding big headed or whatever, there was nobody in Ireland before us doing what we do and looking back fifty years, there's nobody coming behind us that you could say are very much like what we are. There isn't anyone," he emphasises with a hint of sadness. "We based ourselves on The Alexander Brothers from Scotland, who were a duo at the time, and they were playing Scottish songs and Scottish music. We started out to be an Irish version and then, of course, things progressed," he says. "We still do Irish music and Irish ballads. Tony is able to sing everything, but I'm confined to comedy songs and Irish ballads and stuff." This amiable and adventurous duo have had a highly respected stab at also covering

FOSTER

songs outside of their comfort zone: "We've recorded everything from Strauss instrumentals to Dire Straits, but we've done it our way. They'd probably go bananas if they listened to our version. We've even recorded a Status Quo song and stuff like that but, again, in our way," Mick declares with a cheeky cackle.

The crossover potential to country and the blues is always apparent in Irish Country music which shares some of the same music foundations as Mick opens up about this: "We stick to what we consider is commercial. We don't look on from a musician's point of view, we look at it from a punter's point of view and that has worked from day one from playing in pubs." He continues: "A prime example was when we were doing A Bunch Of Thyme before we brought it out as a single and became a hit. We were mainly playing in Irish pubs, and when we started it, the people got up to go to the toilet because it was a slower song. They wanted up-tempo rowdy-dowdy songs that they could sing along to. But as soon as it became a hit, they were then all sitting up and listening to it."

There is footage of the duo wearing their fine green silk attire performing this song on Top Of The Pops as Mick takes up the story: "I had never seen Top of the Pops until I was on it," he declares in his creamy Irish brogue. "My first love is Traditional Irish music, Scottish Dance music, Irish and Scottish folk songs and stuff like that. But Tony was a major Top of the Pops fan. He'd be going home from school as quickly as he could to make sure he wouldn't miss it," he says. The Celtic Connections and Transatlantic Sessions is something of interest to the pair if they were asked as Mick says: "If we were asked to do it then of course we would. I'm very set in the musical ways. All my life, not just now at seventy-seven but all my life from when I was probably seven. The lads were listening to Elvis, I was listening to Jimmy Shand." Jimmy Shand finds favour in many music scenes with accordion playing a big part in the Folk Rock movement reminding me that Richard Thompson recorded Don't Sit On My Jimmy Shands, on his '91 Rumor And Sigh album, in honour of this accordion great.

Mick eventually got to meet his hero as he shares: "My grandmother had an old gramophone, one of the wind up ones with the spring, and she had a load of Jimmy Shand 78s and they were very delicate. As a youngster, I would spend hours listening to Jimmy Shand. I suppose while Top of the Pops was the highlight of Tony's music career, I got to record with Jimmy Shand, and it was the highlight of my music career. He had a world-famous tune back in 1955 called The Bluebell Polka and we met him several times and I've never met a nicer man in my life than him. He was no way affected by his success or his fame, he was just an ordinary, very nice man. With a film crew, we went to where he lived, and we recorded The Bluebell Polka with him."

> **"people got up to go to the toilet because it was a slower song"**

Back to present goings on and Foster and Allen have recorded fourteen new tracks that are included on the 50 At 50 album. That's a whole new album's worth of new recordings: "We recorded some of them during Covid," he recalls, "and we recorded some of them just a few months ago and it will be a keepsake, shall we say, or a souvenir if you are a fan." There are a few surprises as Mick reveals: "We've a new single coming out with Martin Finn who has non-verbal autism. You can't communicate with him. He can't talk but he can sing! Tony sent over some songs, and he came over to the studio and decided to do this song which is Flying Without Wings. His father and mother have to bring him by the hand wherever he's going. His father had to stand with him in the studio and put on the headphones and all that. As soon as the music started, Martin sang away beautifully." There's a big-hearted altruism that this legendary pair share with their fellow musicians and audience as he adds: "We're hoping that by doing this it will help other people like Martin focus on their talent more than any disability and it might be a help to other people that have kids in the same situation."

Both Mick and Tony plan on continuing their musical adventures, "We'll keep going until one of us kicks the bucket and then the other will have one great year after that and then it's gone," he heartily laughs as they are clearly unwilling to let the big man steal their thyme just yet.

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THE BIONIC BLUESMAN

HEAVYDRUNK & WATERMELON SLIM

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Homans and Robinson might sound like a firm of Wall Street bankers or maybe local plumbers. They can certainly clear out any aural passages that may be blocked up. Better known as Watermelon Slim and Heavydrunk, they are two of the best Delta blues musicians on the scene today, and they have collaborated to produce Bluesland, an album that blends their individuality into a cohesive whole, taking the listener on a journey across the Delta from Clarksdale to Tennessee.

With Slim's regular rhythm section of John Allouise and Bryan Shaw, they did a short European tour last year, where I was lucky enough to catch them and hear some of the album live. I also got an early copy, so I've lived with the tracks for a while. It's one of those records that keeps calling you back to listen again—it kinda haunts you in a good way.

Now, with a full release due on February 21st, it felt like the right time to arrange a cross-Atlantic call with Slim and Heavydrunk to talk about how this all came about and discuss the music in more depth.

I phoned Rob (Heavydrunk), who was going to link Slim into the call with us.

RR: Hi Steve, good to hear from you again. Bear with me—I've just got to put the dogs inside. We moved my parents in with us last year, and they have three dogs. We already had three, so now we have six dogs and two cats. We used to be a family; now we're a pack! It's lovely, but it's a full-time job.

“NOW WE’RE A PACK!”

WS: I'm pleased to speak to you again, Steve. It was great seeing you in England. I'm overwhelmed talking to an Englishman—I'm the biggest Anglophile in Mississippi. I might be the only Anglophile in Mississippi! I actually have royal blood.

It was certainly fun seeing you in the UK—you got lots of good feedback from all the shows.

WS: You know, I wasn't at all sure if I was going to have the stamina for the tour. I'm 75 now—it felt like a heavy itinerary, but it turned out to be great fun.

RR: The only problem was right at the end when we all got ill. You know, that often happens when you're in such close proximity to each other all the time. The people in the UK and Spain were all great to us.

How did you guys come to collaborate in the first place?

RR: Well, I travel into Mississippi as often as I can to soak up the blues atmosphere, and one night I was lucky enough to

WELCOME TO FOXFIRE
TOMORROW NIGHT

MARINE BAND

run into Slim in the alley behind The Bluesberry in Clarksdale. He had John Allouise and a different drummer with him. This was around 2015, I guess. The Bluesberry is important because Slim worked there—helping to run the place, cleaning dishes, all sorts—as well as playing there. From there, we did a few gigs together.

After some time, I asked him how he felt about going to Europe together. I eventually talked him into it, so we started putting songs together for the tour. Slim played me Little Big Horn, which I loved and thought was one of his best, but it had never been recorded. So from there, the idea came to record an album. We booked into Dial Back Sound in Water Valley, Mississippi, owned by Matt, the bass player with Drive-By Truckers. It's a funky eight-track studio. We got it down in three days—pretty quickly.

WS: I was only there for two out of the three days, actually.

Tell me about some of the other musicians involved. The backing vocals on Church Bells are stunning. That track is certainly one of my favourites on the album.

RR: That was Etta Britt—she is an amazing vocalist. She was in a band called Dave & Sugar that was successful in the '70s. She's one of the top soul singers around Nashville and in great demand—she's worked with Michael McDonald, John Cougar Mellencamp, and loads of others. It was a blessing to have Slim with us and to put this collaboration together.

One time, I played The Juke Joint Festival with Slim and the boys. That weekend, I drove out to Greenwood along Money Road and found this church called Little Zion—apparently, it's been there since 1872. It's one of the places where Robert Johnson is allegedly buried. It stands right there in the middle of a cotton patch. Up until about 1964, it was the only place where Black people could be buried. I ended up joining that church, and it inspired that song.

WS: You know I love gospel songs—I started out as a choir boy. I think of myself as a singer who plays rather than a player who sings. I sang as a boy soprano soloist. You know, I'm full of stories I remember, but I'm also full of stories I can't remember!

The title track has a big brass intro, but the lyrics are quite dark even though the music feels good-time.

WS: Can I just say, that was the hardest track for me to learn to play.

> **"I'M FULL OF STORIES I REMEMBER, BUT I'M ALSO FULL OF STORIES I CAN'T REMEMBER!**

RR: It's the fastest BPM I've ever written. The horn influence is a little bit New Orleans, a bit Muscle Shoals, and a bit Memphis—it all flows together into a stew. The trombone player is Roy Agee, who played with Prince. You can hear Slim's harmonica mixed in with the horns—that was the first time I'd ever done that. The vocals and lyrics are inspired by my time in the Delta. It is a dark look at the Delta. I dream about creating a Delta theme park.

WS: I'm pleased to say I think I've still got most of my voice, and I love playing harmonica. I'm not the best, but I'm above average—I've been playing a long time. I've broken my wrist a couple of times, broken fingers, and had a shoulder operation, so I'm a little bionic by now. The bionic bluesman. I've fallen off stage a number of times. The first time I visited Clarksdale in 1999, I was robbed and beaten up—the police ran me out of town. I drove back to Oklahoma with a piece of jawbone stuck in my tongue. I still ended up moving there—I guess because I'm a bluesman.

What about Better Worser Too? That's a really dark song.

RR: The big influence for that song was John Lee Hooker. That was me doing my best John Lee Hooker. It's a dark story about marriage—it's like, 'This marriage isn't what I hoped for, but I'm in it, so I'll be as bad as you.'

Another song we should mention is Watermelon Girl.

RR: Yes, as you know, I ran a restaurant in Leiper's Fork, which I've now sold. The great late Tony Joe White used to drop by, and we became friends. We began to write a song together, but sadly, Tony passed before we finished it. Once it was decided to do this album together with Watermelon Slim, it seemed very appropriate to finish it and include it. There's an odd symmetry somehow.

What's next?

RR: I'm not too sure. I've got a load of songs written—possibly for Heavydrunk the band. Also, we have a load of live recordings from the tour, so that's a possibility. I'm sure there will be more to come from this collaboration.

EXPLORE

MIKE FARRIS

Not everyone does things the same as everyone else. The standard route into music is to grow up listening, getting a guitar and picking out tunes in childhood, before advancing to a career as a 'grown up', or as near as it gets for people who play Blues music for a living!

Andy Hughes Ed Rode

Mike Farris, who has just completed a new album, The Sound Of Muscle Shoals, is a mold-breaker in many ways, not least of which is his introduction to making music. BM's Andy Hughes chatted with Mike as he made his way by train from Nashville up to New York, and the conversation began with Mike's start in his career as a musician.

"It didn't start until I was about twenty-one years old." says Mike with a big smile, his soft Southern accent every bit as appealing in conversation as it is on record. "I didn't grow up having any musical talent, or desire to be a singer. I never had any lessons or mentoring, or anything like that. Music came to me as 'divine dispensation', as Plato would say, it literally came out of nowhere. So it was really at a late stage that I found out I could be a musician."

"I was in the throes of addiction from you a young age. I came from a broken home, and broken homes make broken people. I was quite a wayward soul growing up, and I ended up living with my dad who was kind of evicted from my family. I think he voluntarily absented himself from the madness I was living in. I ended up living with him after I had overdosed, and almost lost my life."

"My dad had been in and out of my world at various stages, and at that point in my life, he took care of me, and was determined to help me get past what was happening to me. Music was a passion growing up, it was a very important part of life for me, but I never had any idea of any sort of direction that my life was going to be taking. I never had any options really. My parents were busy trying to make sure we were fed, and they were honestly ill-equipped even to have a family."

"So, I ended up living in my dad's house, and he had a guitar in his home. And one day, I just looked at it and decided that I was going to teach myself to play. And I did, and I started to make music. I started out listening to Van Morrison songs. I felt really drawn to Van because he is a deeply spiritual man, without making a big deal of it at all. I didn't really identify anything spiritual in me as a person at that time, but I knew that there was a connection with it, I knew that. I thought at the time, if I could be anyone at all, I'd like to be Van Morrison. It was really strange, Van came to me in a dream one night, as an angel, which was really weird. And not long after that, I dreamed a song, a complete song, and when I woke up, I grabbed a pencil and paper and wrote the entire song down."

"Within a year, I went from being homeless in a park in Knoxville Tennessee, to flying to New York, I'd never been in a plane before, and sitting in Ahmet Ertegun's office, with framed discs from people like Ornette Coleman and Ray Charles, and that was how my career started out."

In order to write and record his new album, at the renowned Fame Studios, home of the legendary Muscle Shoals music scene and session musicians, Mike went back to The South from his home in New York. It was a cathartic experience for him. "I think writing and recording songs has always been a cathartic experience for me," he confirms. "When I was working on the album previous to this one, Silver And Stone, I figured it was time to pivot, and move my music and my career away from the spiritual aspect it had, and take a more secular route. So, I wondered what I could sing about, what story I wanted to tell, and I realised that I wanted to talk about my life, my experiences, that had got me to where I was at that time. I wanted to tell the world about my wife, and how amazing she is, and how she has been with me through everything that has happened to me, and so she became my muse for the last record."

"Life is full of ups and downs, but for me, music is all about the human condition, so I am following the path that I'm on. I think if you are true to yourself and tell your own story, it can inspire other people."

Does that mean that the return, and the resulting emotional release from creating the new album, is over, or may there be another visit to the well to see what else can be drawn from it?

"I would love to say that that is over and done, but it's not. That's a great question, because it makes me wonder when, and if, everything will be resolved. I guess the answer is that I don't know what is going to happen, I'm going to have to see what works out."

With a little distance in time from the recording of the songs, Mike has had chance to take a step back, and a listen with a more objective ear, and to assess the songs that appeal the most to him.

“I listened to the album again recently after a few months away from it, and the musicianship is just incredible, and it makes the record appeal in so may ways and on so many levels. For me, the song I'll Come Runnin' is one I am very fond of, it just has a real classic rock vibe to it. I love that song man. And Bright Lights was a huge departure musically for me. And it was me letting everyone in, seeing behind the curtain of the music business. All people really see is the lights, and show. But they never see how mentally anguished the people are who do this stuff. The ups and downs are sometimes more that you can take, and Bright Lights delves into that. It was the biggest moment on the record for me.”

“There is no doubt that the conscious decision to leave the big city and return home was a good reason to create the collection of songs for this album. I feel that the idea has been vindicated entirely by the result – does Mike feel the same? “A thousand percent. It's weird because the train we are on is just passing by the area in New York where we used to live.”

“And yes, I did feel I had to get back to Tennessee, to feel the dirt under my feet to write these songs and make this record. But the thing is, I not only had to get out of New York to write my songs, I had to get out of Nashville as well! I'm not sure when was the last time you went to Nashville, but it has really changed over the years. It was always a place where the music is the only thing that matters. I was having trouble with my record label, we have been having issues since 2018, and I phoned my friend Rodney Hall, and told him I needed to get away from my label to make a new record. And he didn't even ask to hear any songs, he just offered for me to come down to Muscle Shoals, and he would pay for everything, for me to make the record. That's because, for those guys, it is still is all about the music. You follow the music, and everything else falls into place. I wanted to use all my friends down there, and I did, and we knocked out the album in two weeks. Almost all of it is first take, vocals and everything.”

Mike is delighted to confirm that he is coming to Europe with his band for some shows, including the UK. Which got us talking about who he would love to open for, or even have to open for him, on a tour.

“Taj Mahal would be wonderful,” offers Mike, with his eyes shining. “Or Keb Mo, the older guys. I would love to open for Van Morrison but he tends not to have opening acts these days. And if we are wishing, then The Stones would be just incredible. And I'd like to work with Marcus King, he is a fabulous musician, you should all check him out.”

And what's next?: “Some shows here in the US around the new album, then over to Europe and the UK, see you there, I hope. And the new album is already written, it's ready to go, I'm looking to record it later this year, and have it released next year, so that is already sorted out. I'll be back to the same studios, get that same vibe and atmosphere going. Really looking forward to that.”

> “FOLLOW THE MUSIC, AND EVERYTHING ELSE FALLS INTO PLACE”

LIVE REVIEW RALPH MCTELL

SOUTH BANK CENTRE,LONDON, JANUARY 2025

Speaking to Ralph McTell a few days before this wonderful London gig, he laughed easily when I asked how it had happened—turning 80 years old!

"Yeah, I know! I don't really know myself. It just sort of happened, crept up on me, maybe. I'm as surprised as you!"

This gig was a celebration of everything McTell. His global hit, Streets of London, of course, had an outing. In truth, no McTell gig would seem complete without that one. But, of course, it's just one of hundreds of songs written by the man over a sixty-year career as a professional musician.

For my money, McTell is undoubtedly one of the UK's finest acoustic ragtime-blues guitarists, with a picking style that holds clear echoes of Big Bill Broonzy at times, followed by Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson at others. (Andy Fairweather Low recently told me how much he admires McTell's picking. As he played a bit of Blind Blake for me, he shook his head in wonder at Ralph's easy mastery of it!) All those old traditional country-blues styles were mastered by this guy decades ago, and now, as an octogenarian, his fingers still fly across the fretboard with flawless beauty and rhythmic delight.

His love of traditional blues is perhaps best reflected in his slide-Delta release, Blue Skies, Black Heroes, from some years ago, but he is also one of those rare people to have met many of the greats—including the late Rev. Gary Davis, from whom he almost bought a guitar in London. (He still regrets not buying it!)

While many of his most popular numbers had an airing—Clare to Here, Streets of London, and others—he also delivered a hugely enjoyable take on a less frequently performed track, Factory Girl, which brought the house down. Switching between six-string and twelve-string guitar at times, McTell also played one of his fans' most popular piano pieces, Naomi, to rapturous applause.

In many ways, this was one of those evenings where the hall felt full of friends—everyone sharing a common love and admiration for McTell's longevity, style, and quietly unassuming talent. Stepping onto the stage, he seemed initially unsure about the stage set, which centred around his instruments, himself, and a—sofa! Definitely a first for him, but he took to it quickly with his usual warmth and wit.

An excellent gig by a master singer-songwriter and an all-too-often overlooked guitar great.

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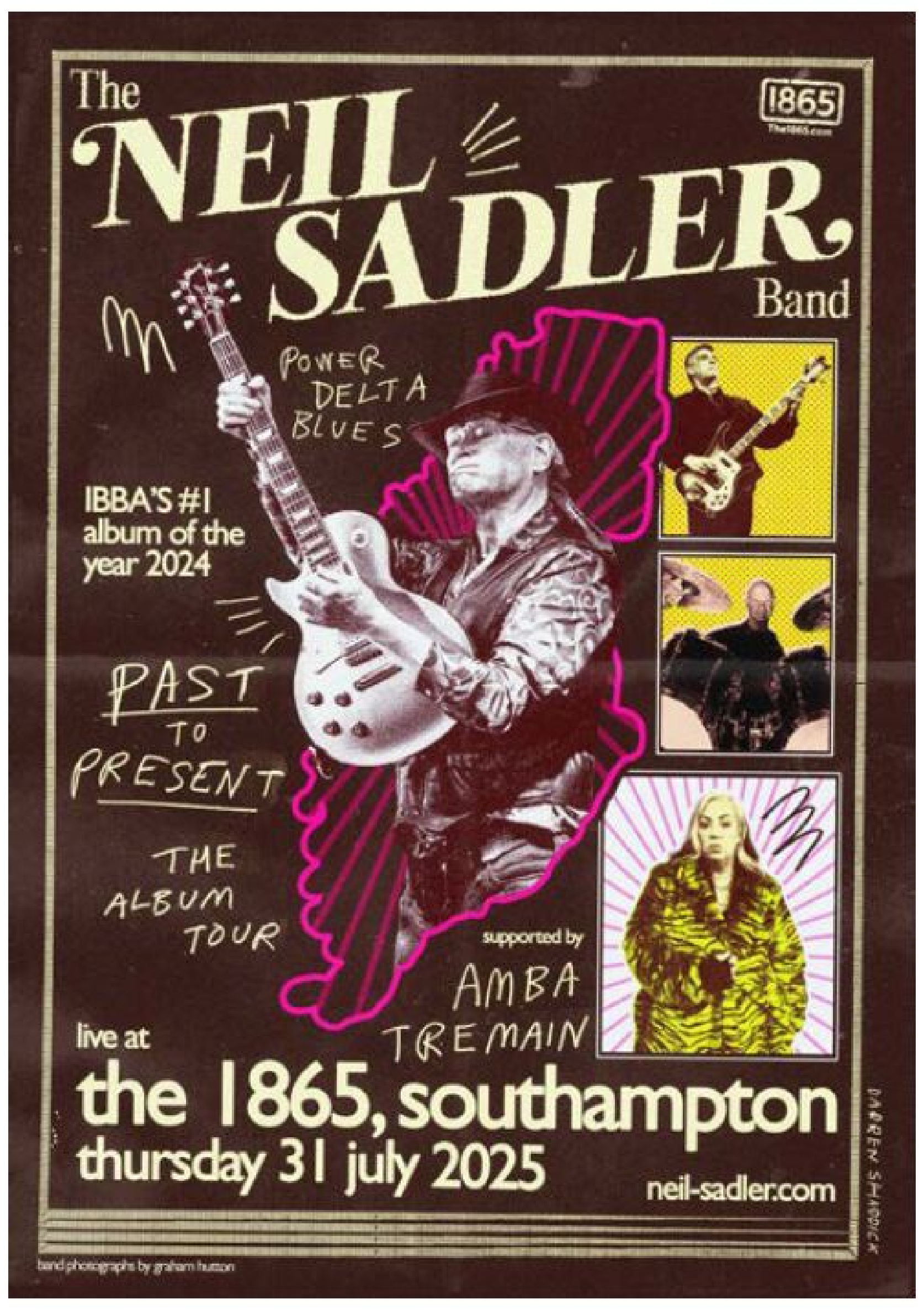

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THE BIG BLUES CHART

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#2 SHEMEKIA COPELAND	BLAME IT ON EVE	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#3 CHRIS O'LEARY	THE HARD LINE	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#4 TORONZO CANNON	SHUT UP & PLAY!	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#5 CHRIS CAIN	GOOD INTENTIONS GONE BAD	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#6 JOHNNY BURGIN	RAMBLIN' FROM COAST TO COAST	STRAIGHT SHOOTER
#7 TINSLEY ELLIS	NAKED TRUTH	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#8 THE FABULOUS THUNDERBIRDS	STRUCK DOWN	STONY PLAIN RECORDS
#9 SUE FOLEY	ONE GUITAR WOMAN	STONY PLAIN RECORDS
#10 DANIELLE NICOLE	THE LOVE YOU BLEED	FORTY BELOW RECORDS
#11 CURTIS SALGADO	FINE BY ME	LITTLE VILLAGE
#12 MIKE ZITO	LIFE IS HARD	GULF COAST RECORDS
#13 ALBERT CASTIGLIA BAND	RIGHTEOUS SOULS	GULF COAST RECORDS
#14 SONNY GULLAGE	GO BE FREE GO BE FREE	BLIND PIG
#15 SUGARAY RAYFORD	HUMAN DECENCY	FORTY BELOW RECORDS
#16 RONNIE BAKER BROOKS	BLUES IN MY DNA	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#17 ALTERED FIVE	BLUES BAND TESTIFYIN	BLIND PIG
#18 JOHN PRIMER & BOB CORRITORRE	CRAWLIN' KINGSNAKE	VIZZTONE
#19 TAB BENOIT	I HEAR THUNDER	WHISKEY BAYOU RECORDS
#20 KID & LISA ANDERSEN	SPIRITS & SOUL	LITTLE VILLAGE
#21 CANNED HEAT	FINYL VINYL	RUF RECORDS
#22 MARK HUMMEL	TRUE BELIEVER	ROCKINITIS RECORDS
#23 JOVIN WEBB	DRIFTER	BLIND PIG
#24 BOBBY CHRISTINA'S CARAVAN	THE LEGACY OF MATT MURPHY	NOLA BLUE
#25 CHRISTONE 'KINGFISH' INGRAM	LIVE IN LONDON	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#26 KEVIN BURT& BIG MEDICINE	A TRIBUTE TO BILL WITHERS	GULF COAST RECORDS
#27 COLIN JAMES	CHASING THE SUN STONY	PLAIN RECORDS
#28 DUKE ROBILLARD	ROLL WITH ME	STONY PLAIN RECORDS
#29 JP SOARS	BRICK BY BRICK	LITTLE VILLAGE
#30 RICK VITO	CADILLAC MAN	BLUE HEART RECORDS
#31 JJ GREY & MOFRO	OLUSTEE	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#32 CEDRIC BURNSIDE	HILL COUNTRY LOVE	PROVOGUE
#33 BILLY PRICE PRICE	PERSON OF INTEREST	LITTLE VILLAGE
#34 ANTHONY GERACI	TEARS IN MY EYES	BLUE HEART RECORDS
#35 DAMON FOWLER	BARNYARD SMILE	LANDSLIDE RECORDS
#36 EDEN BRENT	GETAWAY BLUES	YELLOW DOG RECORDS
#37 JONTAVIOUS WILLIS	WEST GEORGIA BLUES	STROLLING BONES RECORDS
#38ZAC HARMON	FLOREADA'S BOY	CATFOOD RECORDS
#39DEB RYDER	LIVE AND HAVIN' FUN	VIZZTONE
#40 D.K. HARRELL	THE RIGHT MAN	LITTLE VILLAGE
#41 CHICAGO BLUES LIFTERS	BLUES SCOUTS	HITSKOPE RECORDS
#42 THE WICKED LO-DOWN	OUT OF LINE	GULF COAST RECORDS
#43MITCH WOODS	HAPPY HOUR	MOMOJO RECORDS
#44 BOBBY RUSH	ALL MY LOVE FOR YOU	DEEP RUSH
#45 LITTLE FEAT	SAM'S PLACE	HOT TOMATO PRODUCTIONS
#46 ERIC BIBB	LIVE AT THE SCALA THEATRE	STONY PLAIN RECORDS
#47 COCO MONTOYA	WRITING ON THE WALL	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#48 SUE FOLEY	LIVE IN AUSTIN VOL. 1	STONY PLAIN RECORDS
#49 SIERRA GREEN & THE GIANTS	HERE WE ARE	BIG RADIO RECORDS
#50 JOHNNY RAY JONES	MYSTIC CHIEFS	MOONDOGG RECORDS

The Illustrated Blues Of Brian Kramer

John Paul Hammond: One Man, A Whole Lot Of Blues!

I've been thinking about John Paul Hammond lately. He was the first Bluesman I saw live with a steel-bodied, 1930's National resonator guitar.

It was at a small but important venue in Greenwich Village NYC called Folk City, on West 3rd off 6th avenue. It's no longer there. Hasn't been for decades.

This was the place to be through the late 50's, early 60's where you could see young, unknown Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGee, Skip James… The names of endless legends!

It was the summer of 1983, I had been listening to Hammond's releases for a few years, astounded at the unworldly energy and volition of one man, a guitar & harmonica.

His repertoire was somehow accessible to get a grip on understanding the language to Blues that just escaped me by the likes of Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker. You couldn't really easily find folks around that could play that sort of Blues in New York at that time.

So, seeing John at Folk City was a night to remember for me, with a whole new outlook on the future of my Blues journey.

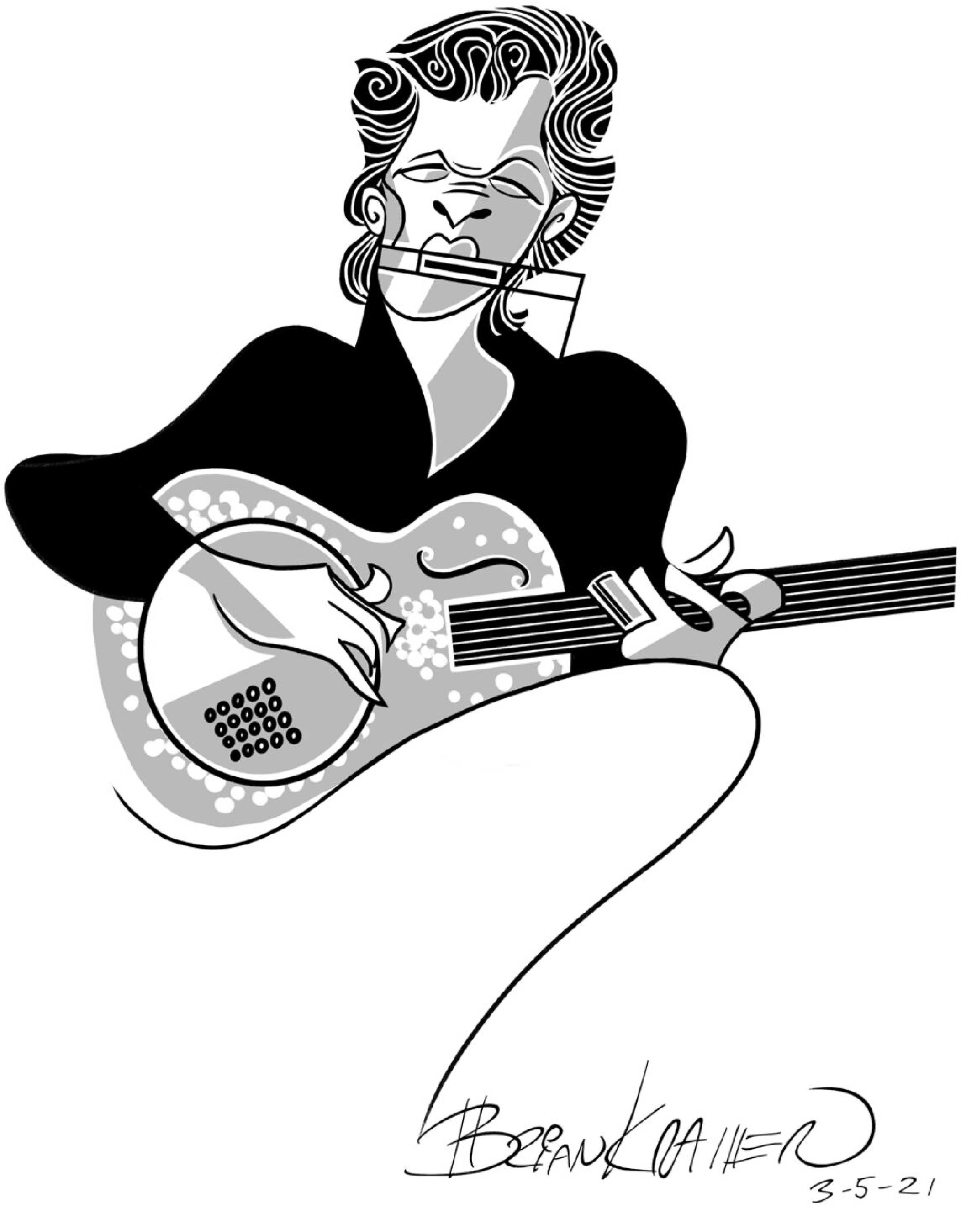
He was indeed fierce. Even more so than what I'd heard on the albums and there was no video access back then to take onboard.

One man sitting on a barstool, harmonica in a harness around his neck, switching between steel guitar and flattop, one microphone in front of the instrument, one for vocal. He held it all together as it swirled through the room like a blue tornado, wrecking everything in it's path, only leaving behind the truth of his soul.

During a break in the sets, I got the nerve up to approach him and ask about a particular song that I wasn't familiar with. I was curious if he wrote it. He seemed a bit put-off by my question and sternly replied "I don't write my own songs!" and moved out of my view, erasing the thought of me instantly.

I felt bad that I wasn't more careful with my query, but it also marked a point in time where I decided to explore songwriting. If for no other reason to not be put in that position myself one day (yes, there was a very healthy dose of young arrogance in me back then).

Fast forward on this road and I soon got my first resonator guitar (then another, then another, then…), and indeed started penning my own material. John Hammond also notably started releasing albums with his own songs (NOW I can surely put that question to him fairly!).



Brian Kramer 3-5-21

I've been thinking about John Hammond lately, because I just bought an amazing, newly released recording of a live performance from 1973; You're Doin' Fine -Blues At The Boarding House.

It's three sizzling sets at a small venue, recorded exquisitely and intimately, that captures John at the top of his game and form.

I was transfixed as I listened, track by track, realizing that this feeling of when I first saw him at Folk City over 40 years ago, was ignited once again. Blues is mighty powerful stuff in the right hands, and John Hammond is, was, and always will be the real deal for sure.

So, I decided to present here, an earlier art piece I created in tribute of John, from 2021. One that still holds up for me because I truly tried to capture this essence of his energy and command.

Thank you Mr. John Paul Hammond for a lifetime of Country Blues inspiration, that clearly ain't over yet!

OPEN AIR

Blues FESTIVAL

BREZOI • VÂLCEA

22-27 JULY 2025

BIG BLUES REVIEWS

BLUESLAND
THEME PARK
HEAVY DRUNK
& WATERMELON SLIM

WATERMELON SLIM & HEAVYDRUNK

BLUESLAND

Independent

This collaboration between multi-award-winning blues legend Watermelon Slim and the hugely talented Heavydrunk may not have been made in heaven, but it was made in Mississippi—and that's pretty close. Having played together since 2016, their decision to tour Europe led to the recording of Bluesland in the heart of the Delta. The album kicks off with Bluesland Theme Park, its big brass section soaring while Slim's harmonica pierces through. A good-time groove with darker lyrics—I sure want to ride on a Muddy Waters Slide. New Wine is bluesy but lifted by brass and rich backing vocals, creating a fricassee of sound. Slim's Little Big Horn follows—an evocative take on Native American culture and the Montana prairies. Heavydrunk calls it one of Slim's best and a key reason for making this album. A true standout is Church Bells (Little Zion), where brass explodes, Slim's harmonica wails, and Etta Britt's gospel vocals bring the track to life, painting vivid imagery of Robert Johnson's resting place in a Greenwood cotton patch. Watermelon Girl offers a gentler, retrospective tune originally co-written with Tony Joe White, fitting seamlessly into the collection. Road Food and Cheap Motels captures the weary troubadour's journey, while You Make Me Want To proves Heavydrunk's songwriting depth, steering clear of sentimentality. Better Worse Too is a dark, brooding blues steeped in John Lee Hooker's influence. A stripped-back acoustic version of Little Big Horn follows before Australia bursts in—a stomping celebration of wild kangaroos, strange gungaroos, and boomerangs. The album closes with Fresh, a soulful track tinged with Motown, featuring lush backing vocals. Bluesland is a tasteful jambalaya of Delta blues, Louisiana cool, and Memphis soul—an album well worth your attention.

STEVE YOURGLIVCH

EXPLORE

CHESTER DIAMONDS

HOT HOUSE REVISITED

Diamond Stomp Records

Chester Diamonds originate from Helsinki, Finland, that's about as much as I know about the band. What I do know is, that Hot House Revisited is the band's debut album, and what a debut they have made. The band has adapted their sound and take on the Blues in a similar way that R. L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough did back in the day. Chester Diamonds is a four-piece band consisting of, Bass, Guitar, Drums, and Lead vocals with writing duties shared between Jussi Kaskinen and Sami Ravattinen. The opening track, Riflebird Boogie made me cast my mind back to the very early stages of Dr. Feelgood, with the hard riffs and hard Rock and Roll vibes, thunder boogie for want of a better phrase. The album continues in much of a similar vane, sometimes adding very dark lyrics whilst still maintaining the machine-gun guitar that fires its way through most of the songs. Sinner Blues, for me, is the standout track on the album, it has a dirty, gritty edge to it, with vocals to match. All in all, this debut album, for me, is a brilliant introduction to this band. As we all know, the Scandinavian Blues Scene has long since produced many fine bands and artists. Chester Diamonds are the new kids on the block, long may they reign.

STEPHEN HARRISON

ED ALSTROM

FLEE THOUGH NONE PURSUE

HAYWIRE

Ed Alstrom is a veteran musician, singer, and songwriter with unrivalled skills on the organ, and incidentally, many other instruments. He's performed with the likes of Chuck Berry, Steely Dan, Dion and Hubert Sumlin, to name a few. On this latest release, Flee Though None Persue, Alstrom deftly handles lead and backing vocals, Hammond/Farfisa/pipe organs, piano, Fender Rhodes, clavinet, synthesizers, guitars, bass, mandolin, melodica, alto sax, accordion, Theremin and percussion, weaving them all into his original musical style, with a varied group of talented musicians helping out.

Alstrom releases Flee Though None Pursue coinciding with him representing the North Jersey Blues Society in the Solo/Duo competition at the 2025 International Blues Challenge in Memphis. The album is filled with the wit and wisdom of Alstrom's masterful song writing, and eloquent storytelling in the eighteen original tracks. The album opens with the uplifting soulful blues of Be Nice, deep vocals and lively organ sets the mood on this jaunty toe-tapper. There is a hint of a Latin vibe on Blues Ain't Alright, another grooving number that features a nifty organ solo and good backing vocals from Ula Hedwig. On Slow Blues, a deep rhythmic beat sets the pace with slide guitar and organ urging Alstrom to wail and moan his troubles away. Robert Hill offers some fine subtle guitar playing on the captivating title track Flee Though None Persue, Jerry Vivino adds some stellar saxophone sounds on the soulful, The Truth, and phat, honking notes on the New Orleans flavoured Fruitcake, although all original material, musically Sick, is reminiscent of the Doc Pomus number Lonely Avenue, and Sometimes, brings to mind the classic Little Walter number My Babe, some fine honky tonk piano playing lays down a grooving rhythm while Alstrom takes a wry dig at the industry on, The Record People, the album closes with Don't Cry At My Funeral, a whimsical take on death with an uplifting Celtic feel, an enjoyable album with a nice mixture of styles.

SHIRL

GRANT SABIN

WORK

Gitcha Records

The talented guitarist Grant Sabin shows the full colours of his talent on the 10 tracks that make up his latest release, Work. As the singer, writer, guitarist, harmonica and trumpet Player, he carries much of the musical weight, with strong support from AJ Fullerton on bass and guitar, and drummer Forrest Raup. The songs range from the bluesy stomp of opener Work, with its drum beat and vocal opening, and Led Zeppelin-like guitar and harmonica figure. Baby Wanna Be Right is opened by distorted harmonica, and a circular slide guitar riff, and is a love song of sorts. Head Shaker is a slower song, with

THE HITMAN BLUES BAND

The Hitman Blues Band
Calling Long Distance

CALLING LONG DISTANCE

Nerus Records

The Hitman Blues Band's latest release is a sonic firestorm of energy, groove, and raw blues power, destined to ignite any listener's soul. Founded by New York-based singer, guitarist, and songwriter Russell "Hitman" Alexander, the band has mastered the art of blending traditional blues with an electrifying mix of swing, country, jazz, and rock & roll. Each track bursts with a rhythm so infectious it demands you just move, dance, and surrender to its intensity. Featuring eight original compositions, including the sublime opener, Calling Long Distance and the up-tempo humorous Edge Of The Bed, and the surf groove tones of Blood Alley, alongside reinterpretations of classics like Johnny Cash's Folsom Prison Blues, the traditional I Know You Rider reimagined with Alexander's unique flair, S. Maxwell's Watch That Thing, and Kris Kristofferson's heartfelt Sunday Morning Coming Down. This collection brims with raw emotion and impressive musicality, delivering a punch that transcends the ordinary. Alexander's commanding vocals and guitar prowess anchor the lineup, complemented by Mike Katzman's dynamic keyboards, Mike Porter's bass grooves, Guy LaFontaine's driving drums, and a radiant horn section featuring John Kelly (alto sax), Tom Mineo (tenor sax), Eric Altarac (trumpet), and Al Alpert (trombone). Backing vocals by Joanna Alexander and Nancy Hampton, along with guest bassist and Producer, Bob Stander on two tracks, elevate the sound to new heights and beyond. This is a powerhouse of expressive, unrelenting energy that cements The Hitman Blues Band as a must-hear for blues aficionados and beyond. Prepare to be blown away when you see them in concert.

> *a sonic firestorm of energy, groove, and raw blues power*

COLIN CAMPBELL

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

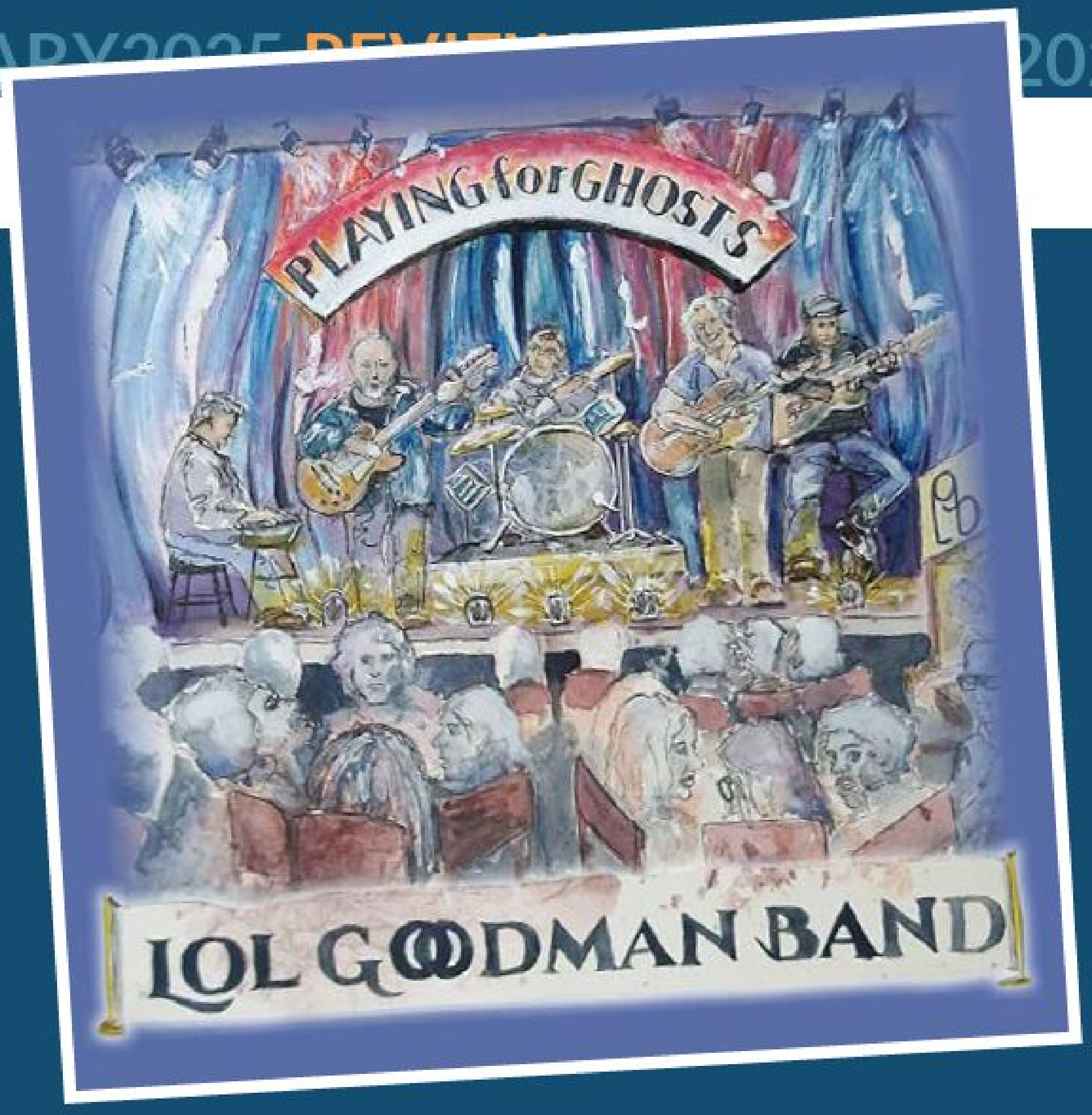
spirited Harmonica. The only cover is a fast groove reading of Robert Johnson's If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day, here taken at a gallop with stinging slide guitar and lively vocals. The rockiest song on the album is I Know You, with an insistent bluesy lick, lightly distorted lead vocals and complex drum and bass patterns. Lucky Frog is a lighter song, with some hi-life African influence. The album is a good listen, with some quality songs and playing throughout. It stays away from bombast and screaming solos, making quality music the aim.

BEN MACNAIR

LOL GOODMAN BAND

PLAYING FOR GHOSTS

Scruddy



Based in Rochdale just north of Manchester, the vastly experienced singer, lead guitarist and songwriter Lol Goodman's six-piece outfit offers the listener a wide variety of blues-rock and related musical styles in the good old-fashioned way on this, their fifth studio album. There is a bit of seventies outfit Bad Company to the catchy opener Dream Rider, and a memorable hook too to the next track up, Pretty Mama, with its fine guitar riff and slight soul tinge. Should is the bluesy third track whilst Look Around is a solid slab of gospel-flavoured blues-rock. Blues inflections continue with Alpha Woman and the tough sounding, if unlikely titled blues-rocker Woopy Bluetime, with its very slight hint of Jimi Hendrix in the guitar work and some southern rock influences. This last inspiration also crops up elsewhere, most notably on The Dancer, particularly in the extremely fine twin guitar lead playing with Lol's veteran accomplice James's "Doc" Horrocks sharing six-string duties to great effect. Moving a little further afield are the nostalgic We Were Free with an almost early seventies country-rock feel – now we call it Americana, I guess, and Americana can also be heard on Stick Around, though there are also once again strong traces of southern rock in the instrumental break. This rather fine release closes with Last Touch, a solo piano accompanied ballad, showing another string to Lol's bow. So, it's a big shout out to Lol and his crew for a varied bunch of intelligent songs with a variety of excellent accompaniments which should appeal to most, and maybe all, readers then.

> *a varied bunch of intelligent songs with a variety of excellent accompaniments*

Lol Goodman
TAMA

NORMAN DARWEN

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

JON SLIDEWELL AND THE REEDCUTTERS

POOR BOY BLUES

Independent

This twelve track CD is an independent limited Promo release by the band which I understand will be followed up in early 2025 with an official album release. If this offering is anything to go by, the debut album should be a real treat and something to look forward too. Jon leads the band on vocals and Guitar, supported by Dave Roberts on Bass and S.A. Wright on Drums. All three musicians did spend time a couple of years ago with a UK Blues band called JP & The Razors, whose lead guitarist at the time was Jake Poole, who helps on this album playing on almost half the tracks. All tracks are self-written and self-produced, the opening two songs Poor Boy Blues and So In Love are very strong with Jon and Jake performing some tasty lead and slide guitar work along with harmonica. The material falls easily into a "Rocking Blues" framework and is played with vigour, the only song that falls outside this style is the final track Cloak & Dagger which is more of a stark acoustic Country Blues song that was originally recorded on a Sony Walkman before being transferred to a 4-track. Very low-fi but has something about it that I really enjoyed. These songs are raw but will benefit from some professional studio time when they can be embellished and given more depth for their forthcoming album. The band are certainly not the finished article but there is a lot of promise in the musicianship and song-writing, in addition it is evident that they play with great enthusiasm which comes across in their "good time rocking blues" sound. Definitely a band to look out for.

ADRIAN BLACKLEE

LEAVIN' TRUNK

THE RIVER

Rooks Records

At the heart of this band is a pulsating rhythm section that marries a swampy New Orleans funk with an earthy British blues influence. Frontman Tim Aves pours decades of experience into the band's powerful, soulful delivery. With a pedigree that includes leading Automatic Slim, The Rockin' Armadillos, and Tim Aves & Wolfpack. Bassman Rob "Tank" Barry lays down grooves as solid as they come, having played alongside UK blues royalty like Ian Siegal and Jon Amor. Drummer John Butters, a veteran of bands like The Groove Doctors, brings decades of rhythmic mastery to the table, while guitarist Craig Fillbrook injects the perfect mix of edge and soul. The icing on the cake is keyboardist Adam Whyatt, whose elegant, jazzy flourishes tie it all together on these seven well-crafted tunes. The opener, Claw Hammer sets a bluesy tone, humorous lyrics, and sublime vocal delivery a great tune. There are audio liner notes for the discerning listener so buy this release and find out for your-

GREEN SHACK

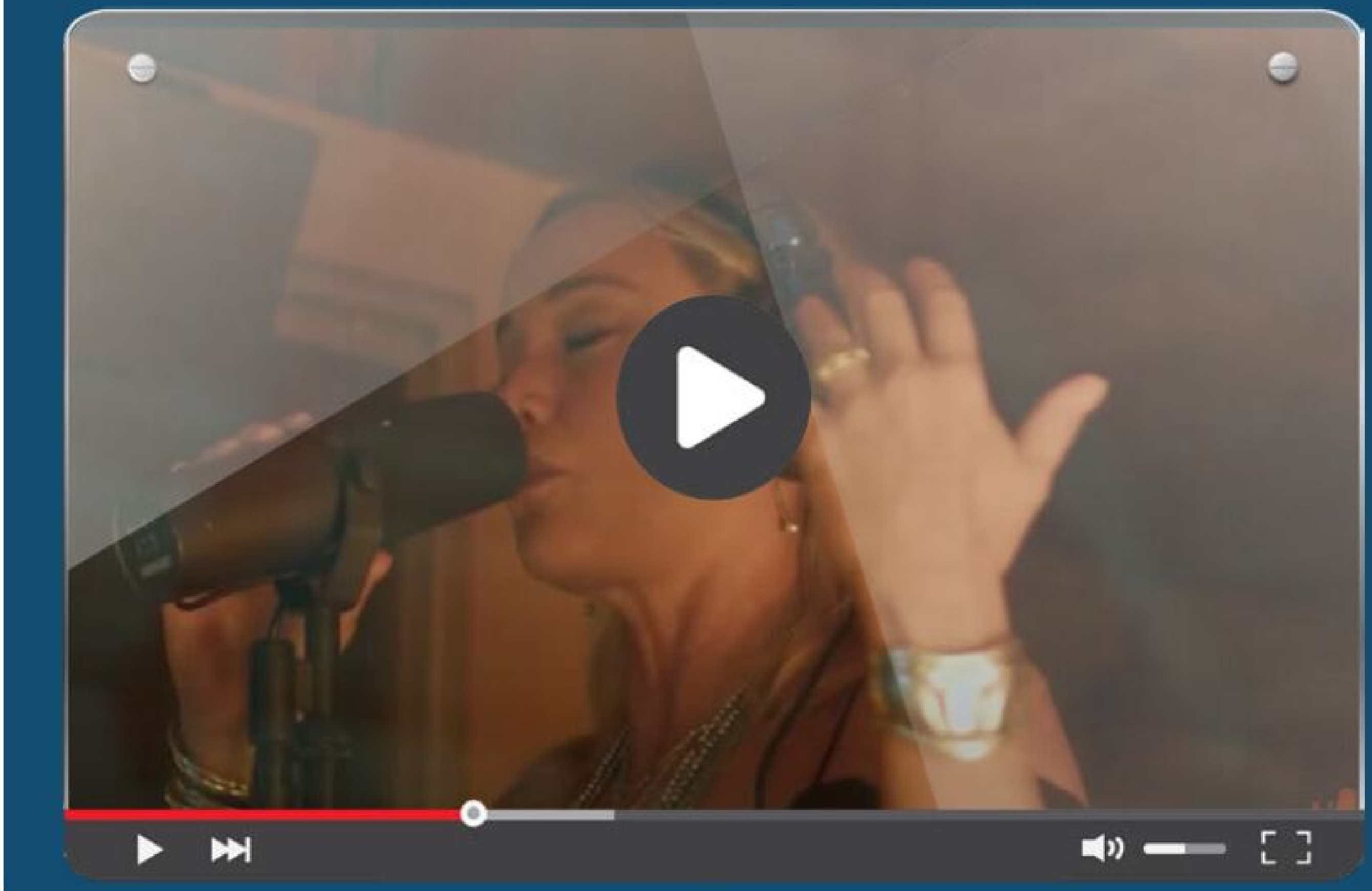
GRETCHEN RHODES AND FRIENDS

Licorice Pizza Records

GREEN SHACK
GRETCHEN RHODES
FEATURING MICK FLEETWOOD
JOE CARO
CARMINE ROJAS
AND FRIENDS

This album has been seven years in the making, was it worth the wait I hear you ask? You bet your bottom dollar it was worth the wait. The album is basically split into two stories, Side (A) contains three songs from the Peter Green formation of Fleetwood Mac, and Side (B) features songs from Chicken Shack which had Christine Perfect (McVie) as a singer and songwriter, hence the name of the album. The album lists "And Friends", and by coincidence, Gretchen comes from the Hawaiian Island of Maui, which also happens to have been the long-term residence of Mick Fleetwood. Three tracks on each side may seem a bit of a short album, but, each side contains amazing tunes from the Peter Green era, and the Chicken Shack era. Side (A) kicks off with, Oh Well, a magnificent reminder of just how good a band Fleetwood Mac was in the late sixties, with thundering drums, courtesy of Mick Fleetwood, driving bass lines from Carmine Rojas, and the Blues power vocals of miss Rhodes. Add to that, the guitar chops of Joe Caro, and what you have is the blueprint for a trip down memory lane, and then some. One of my all-time favourite. Songs from that era are Rattlesnake Shake. High-energy Blues like a well-oiled freight train hurtling down the track, with Mick at the wheel. Black Magic Woman, is, of course, a classic, but as yet, I've not heard it performed by a female vocalist before, It's about time this song comes from a woman's perspective, a woman's stance, Gretche Rhodes delivers with bells on. Side (B), contains, A Woman Is The Blues, Get Like You Used To Be, and, It's Ok With Me Baby, bringing fond memories of Christine Perfect, as she was then, before joining the band that would propel her into superstardom. Having been a relative novice to Gretchen Rhodes as an artist before listening to this album, I am now of the belief that the world of Blues has unearthed another gem, something that the Island of Maui has known about for a long time.

> *the world of Blues has unearthed another gem*



STEPHEN HARRISON

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

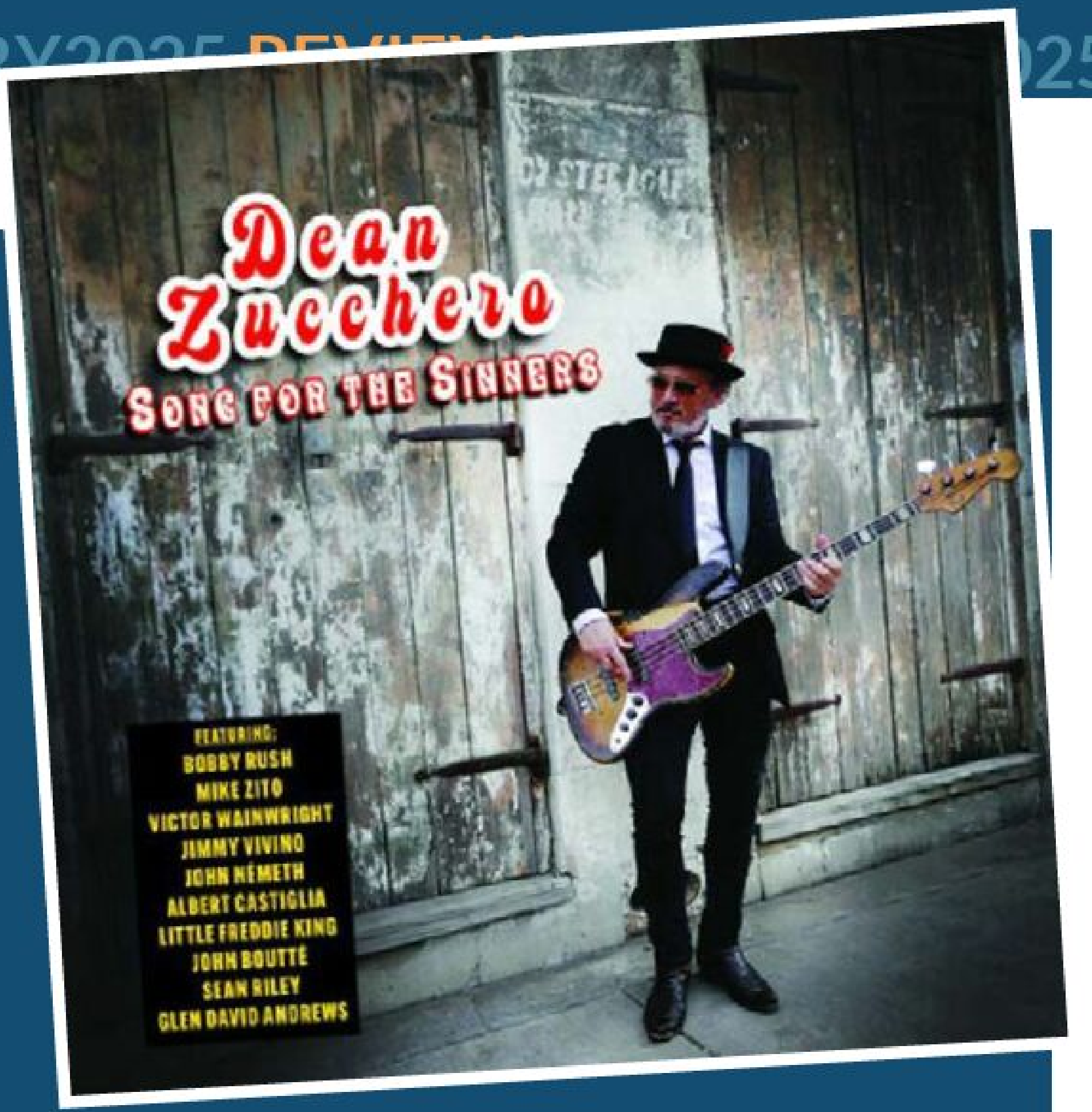
self from Tim Aves, vocalist just what all the tracks are about on the eighth track. Their version of Shop Around is powerful and it's all about the story like the other tunes like The Money Tree and innuendo infused, The Love Machine. Tryin' To Live My Life Without You has a catchy chorus about a relationship break up; with the narrator reflecting on his life. Train Song has a laid-back rhythm, peppered with piano tones and the band gets to rock out here. The River is an undoubted highlight that ebbs and flows with bluesy musicality, a sonic soundtrack. Blues, soul, this band mixes genres with their own inimitable take, a great release.

COLIN CAMPBELL

DEAN ZUCCHERO

SONG FOR THE SINNERS

Pugnacious Records



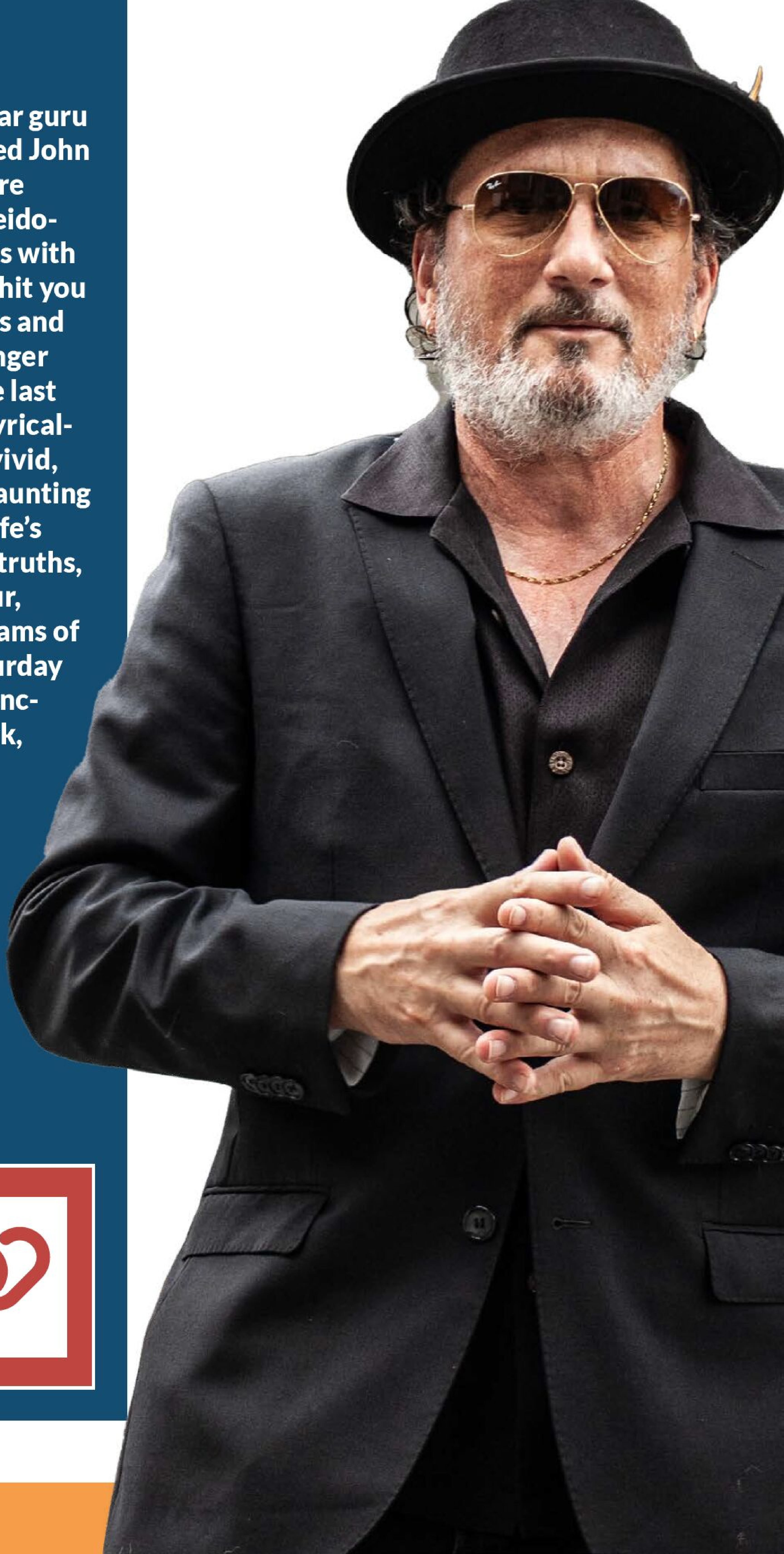
Less than two spins around the sun after his Billboard-topping blues debut, Electric Church for the Spiritually Misguided in 2023, New Orleans' bass-slinging maestro Dean Zucchero is back at it. This time, he's laid down a raw, soul-shaking collection of originals on this 12-track sermon of groove, grit, and guts, all penned, arranged, and produced by the man himself. Zucchero has assembled a pantheon of blues and roots royalty to join his journey. The lineup reads like a who's who of modern blues, the electrifying Bobby Rush, on harmonica on the track Lullaby. Mike Zito, vocals and guitar on, Tone Of The City. Piano powerhouse Victor Wainwright, on She's Saturday Night. Albert Castiglia, vocals and guitar on the track Shine. The soulful John Németh, guitar guru Jimmy Vivino, swamp blues legend Little Freddie King, velvet-voiced John Boutté, the brass-blasting Glen David Andrews, Sean Riley, and more just class musicians on every song. Musically, Zucchero crafts a kaleidoscopic tapestry of sounds, channelling the magic of the '60s and '70s with grooves that hit you where it hurts and hooks that linger long after the last note fades. Lyrically, he paints vivid, sometimes haunting portraits of life's unvarnished truths, love gone sour, shadowy dreams of revenge, Saturday night indulgences, heartbreak, forbidden romance, drunken revelations, and the ever-looming spectre of mortality. This wonderful New Orleans gumbo is a confessional, a celebration, and a reckoning. This one's destined for heavy rotation and should be in the listener's top releases of 2025, no doubt about it.

> *12-track sermon of groove, grit, and guts*

Ever Rising
Over Flowi
his is Never
What I Knew

COLIN CAMPBELL

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS



MEMPHIS MINNIE

THE FIRST LADY OF COUNTRY BLUES

Jasmine Records

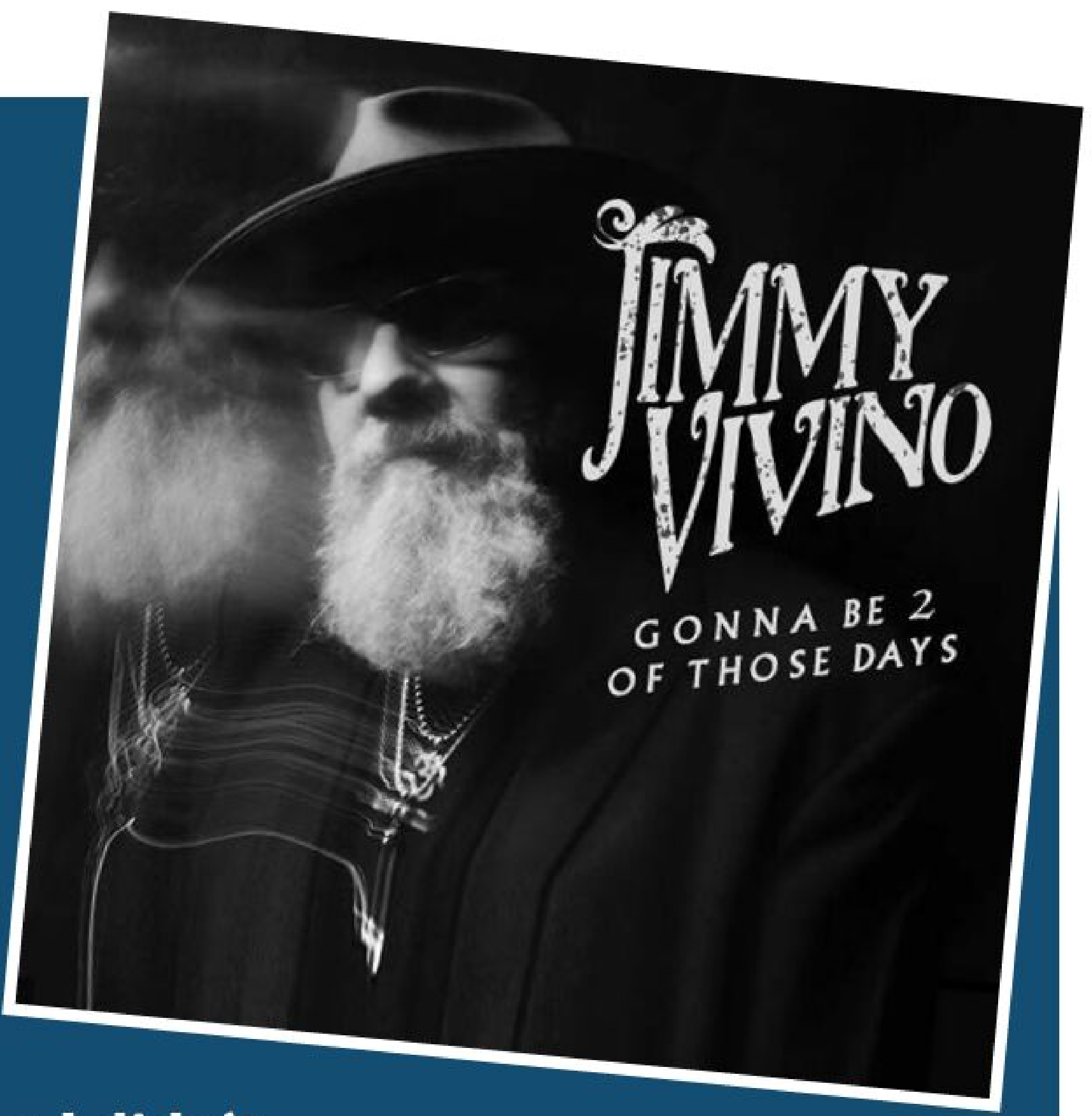
Picking up this double album, means a true history lesson is about to ensue. Minnie, although known to me, is not someone I often listen to, which is a shame because I'd say she was the foremost female guitarist of Blues, often equal to male artists around at the time, even famously beating Big Bill Broonzy in a guitar off in a Chicago club in the early thirties! The first track has her with Kansas Joe on vocals along with the gritty sound of an old LP it kicks off this double album. This is old school; this is Blues history which appeals to my historian musical ear. There are fifty-four tracks laid out here from 1929-1953, a twenty-four-year span of songs that, to me, stand the test of time and is quite an accomplished career! Imagine America at that time, which is easy when you look at the list of songs on here like, When The Levee Breaks, What's the Matter with the Mill, Chickasaw Train Blues and so on. Also, one of the traits and things that appeal to my Blues loving nature is some of the song titles also conjure up my mischievous side, titles like Dirty Mother Fuyer, Pig Meat On The Line and Killer Driller. Kansas Joe appears on various tracks on this double album along with Joe Johnson and Little Son Joe, all guitar husbands of Minnie. Nothing lets me down, this is Blues heritage of the highest order, it has the sound, the grit, the nostalgia. All albums that end up in my collection are for one thing, for me to listen to alone. I may share an occasional one with a friend, but mostly they are for my listening pleasure, no disturbance from people, no talking, no drinking or even singing along, sharing is what Minnie has done by writing, performing and recording these songs and I thank her for that. This is exactly what it says on the tin. Blues, plain and simple.

BARRY BLUESBARN HOPWOOD

JIMMY VIVINO

GONNA BE 2 OF THOSE DAYS

Gulf Coast Records



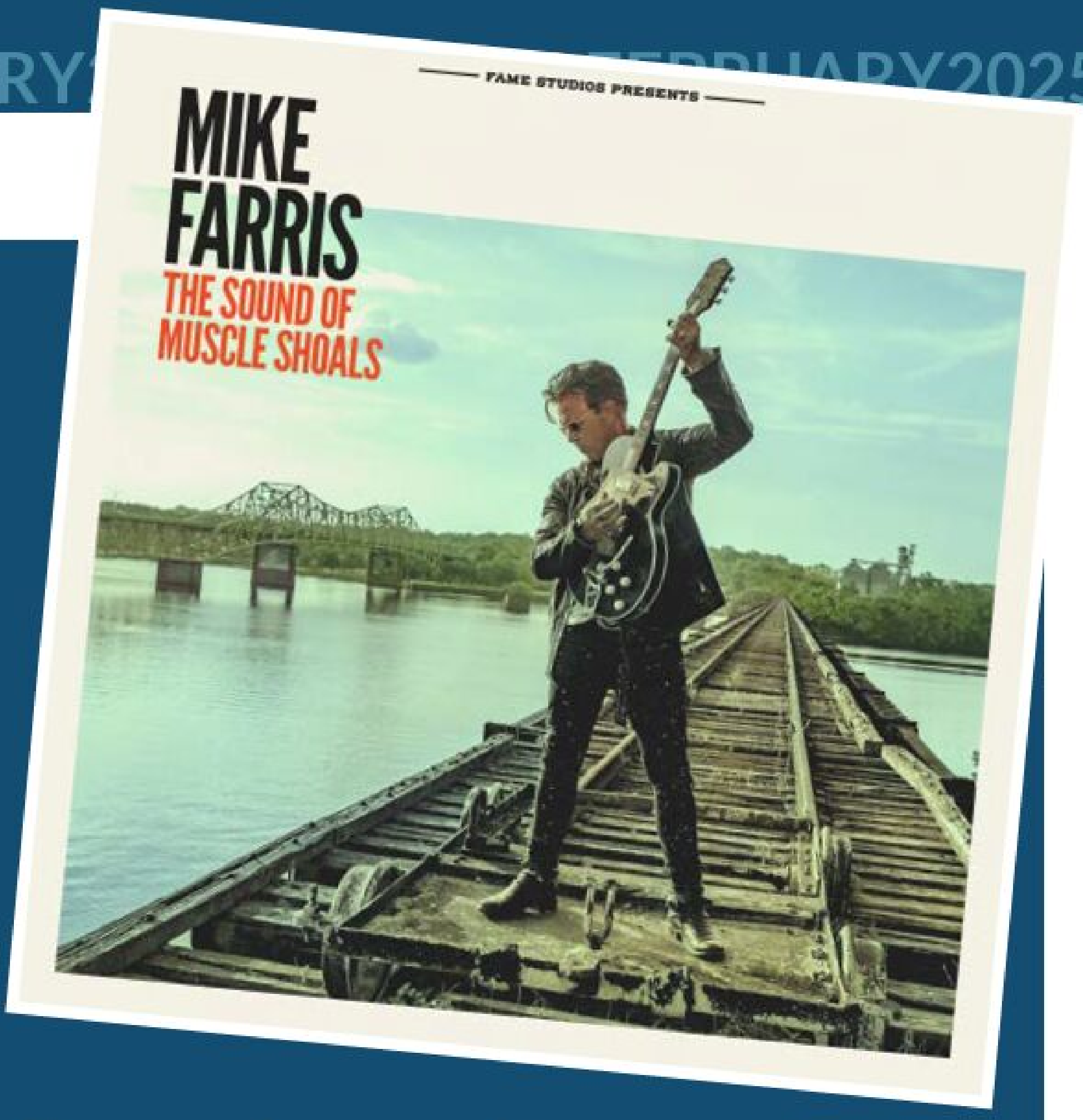
Jimmy Vivino's latest solo release and first one for this record label is a masterpiece of musical styles based in the blues roots. He describes blues as "a house I didn't built but I'm just renting a room" in a recent interview with Blues Matters and these eleven mostly self-penned tunes run the gamut of human feelings and nods to influences on his songwriting such as Bob Dylan. He has collaborated with a lot of musicians in the past and here is no exception. He calls up Joe Bonamassa to trade licks on the opener, Blues In the 21st, a post pandemic retrospective song. Later he features John Sebastian on Beware The Wolf, a homage to Howlin' Wolf and the final track, possibly inspired by his time with Canned Heat, Back Up The Country. Recorded and mixed in New York with help from Rich Pagano, the quality of recording is excellent. Vivino's signature blend of blues, rock, and soul is evident throughout the album. Tracks like Ruby Is Back and Shady Side of the Street highlight his dynamic guitar work and emotive vocals, while Fool's Gold and Crossed My Mind highlight his songwriting prowess. The music flows, evolving as he experiments with rhythms and melodies. Vivino embraces collaboration, allowing band members to infuse their instincts into the arrangements of the songs. Gonna Be 2 of Those Days is a testament to Jimmy Vivino's enduring talent and his deep roots in the blues and rock traditions.

> *a testament to Jimmy Vivino's enduring talent and his deep roots in the blues and rock traditions*

THE BITTER END

COLIN CAMPBELL

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS



MIKE FARRIS

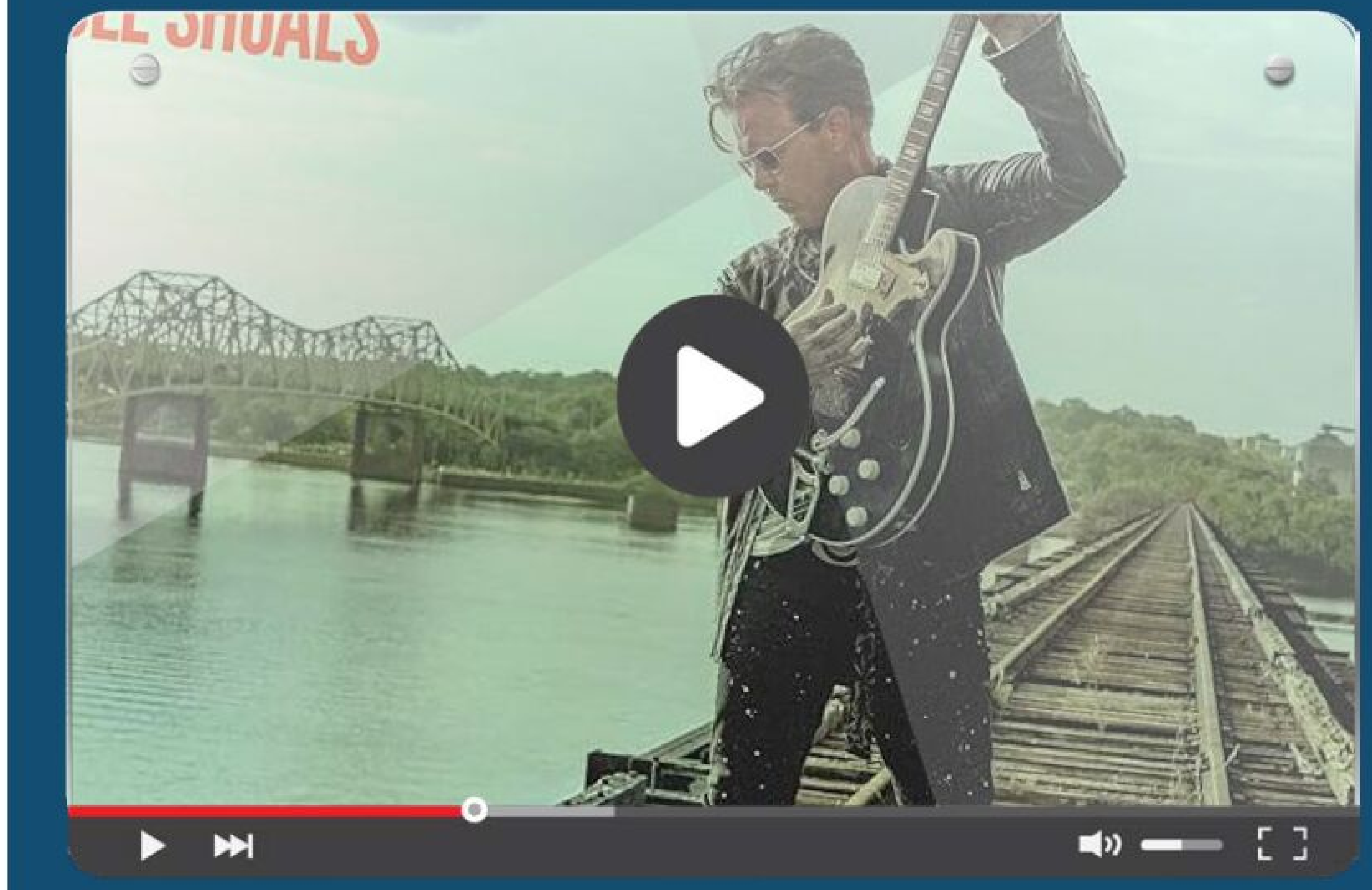
THE SOUND OF MUSCLE SHOALS

FAME RECORDS

The new album from Southern Blues Rock Supremo Mike Farris opens with that sinuous bass and gorgeous bluesy electric piano sound that so epitomises that laid-back cool funky Southern style. You know the band are ready for the count-in, and in they slide and the album is off and running. Ease On is the story of Mike growing up, a perfect introduction to the Muscle Shoals crew, and Mike Farris's peerless vocals. Personally, I enjoy it when an artist goes against 'type' and pulls off something different and special. And in this album, I'll Come Runnin' ticks that box. The backing is dialled down a little, to allow the pure soul and emotion of Farris's vocal to shine through.

> *If Jagger is looking for someone to open, he should give Mike a call*

Understated Gospel backing vocals offer a bed for his voice to lie on, and a scorching guitar solo is the cherry on top, especially when they all blend together at the end. Top Class Blues right here. The album unfolds beautifully with the vocals and musicianship reaching a majestic peak on Slow Train. You have to have suffered to write and sing songs like this, and every atom of Mike Farris's hard life are laid out in this music. It really wouldn't sound as good without the pure class of the Muscle Shoals studio musicians laying down the magic, often in one take. Mike Farris is not shy when it comes to recounting his experiences, and Before There Was You And I is clearly a hymn to his wife, and the love they enjoy together. Any blues fans looking for a song to walk down the aisle to, could do a lot worse than to choose this. And the album ends with a wonderful piece of optimism in Sunset Road, reminding us that there is always another day tomorrow. This is a classic of its genre, and should ensure that Mike Farris's career continues upwards. If Mick Jagger is looking for someone to open the next Stones tour, he should give Mike a call, I'm sure he would be up for it, and he's certainly equal to the task.



ANDY HUGHES

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

MICHELE BIONDI

WORLD TRAVELER

Madamadore

It's a funny old world! For technical reasons at this moment I am completely cut off from the Internet. As a result I am writing this review of the new album from Michele and his band with no preconceived ideas gleaned from external sources. I have to confess it is rather refreshing just me, the CD, the booklet and my stereo cranked way on up there. So according to the hand-written note included, this is album number four for Italy based Michele. The album was recorded last January (2024) but now coming to our ears January 2025. Again, gleaned from the booklet, it is a "live" recording. No audience but the tracks were all laid down in the studio straight with the players all together in the same room. It has that nice sound, and a togetherness, which can only be achieved, when done in one take. I like it! So we get eleven cuts with all bar one, Come On In My Kitchen, being originals. We have Michele guitar / vocals, Giovanni Grasso bass Angelo Carmignani drums and Andrea Maffei harmonica and together these four guys cook up a fine risotto of Blues grooves. Another Shot, with its shuffle beat is excellent. Opening cut Joy has a kind of sing along feel especially at the a cappella bridge section. Mrs Camelia begins with a harp solo section before the band opens it up. However that harp continues to be the focus instrument throughout the song. In fact, upon reflection the guitar and harp share the focus instrument pretty evenly throughout. So should you be partial to no frills, straight-ahead Blues, reminiscent of Canned Heat a little then this could be for you.

GRAEME SCOTT

REVEREND PEYTON'S BIG DAMN BAND

HONEYSUCKLE

Family Owned Records

Reverend Peyton's Big Damn Band delivers a gritty, rollicking collection with Honeysuckle, a masterful exploration of roots music that blends Delta blues, back-porch folk, and barn-burning energy. This release solidifies the trio's place as torchbearers of the Americana tradition, offering raw authenticity wrapped in exceptional musicianship. The release opens with the title track, Honeysuckle, a raucous anthem displaying Reverend Peyton's slide guitar wizardry. His resonator guitar sings and growls with unmistakable soul, backed by the washboard rhythms of Breezy Peyton and Max Senteney's steady drum work. The song captures the essence of simple joys, wildflowers, love, and life's fleeting beauty, without a hint of pretence. Throughout the songs, Peyton's gravelly, earnest vocals shine, pulling listeners into stories that are as visceral as they are relatable. Tracks like, Looking For A Manger, pulse with swampy grit, while the haunting, I Can't Sleep, slows the pace, evoking the calm serenity of a sunrise. Each song feels lived-in, full of warmth and authenticity that never veers into cliché. The production is as raw as the performances, allowing every slide, stomp, and snarl to breathe. This isn't polished perfection, it's music that sweats, grooves, and grinds. What truly elevates this release is the band's chemistry; their stripped-down instrumentation proves that power doesn't require a wall of sound. For fans of genuine, unvarnished Americana, this release is a triumph. Reverend Peyton's Big Damn Band doesn't just play roots music, they embody it, with every note demanding to be felt, not just heard.

COLIN CAMPBELL

SEAN CHAMBERS

LIVE AT DARYL'S HOUSE CLUB

Quatro Valley Records

The Live At Daryl's series has been ongoing for over ten years now. It has featured artists such as Booker T Jones, Joe Walsh, and Vince Gill, to name just three. It's a get-together of like-minded musicians who end up in a jam session, often covering each other's songs, and on odd occasions like now, an album has been recorded for prosperity to celebrate the amazing music of Savoy Brown. Savoy Brown was the catalyst for the humble beginnings of Blues Matters Magazine over a quarter of a century ago, so this is a wonderful trip down memory lane that includes the rhythm section of, Pat De Salvo(Bass), and Garnet Grimm (Drums). Sean Chambers on lead vocals and guitar, drives the live set with vigor and raw gusto. The opening tune, Cobra, is a Blues/Rock powerhouse instrumental that pins you back into your seat, waiting with bated breath for the next onslaught. Savoy Brown played an integral part in the British Blues scene from the middle 60s, and up until the tragic passing of Kim Simmonds, they were still influencing many bands and artists. Red Hot Mama, Louis, and Ten Til Midnight are given the Sean Chambers treatment on guitar and vocals, he has such a brilliant vocal range of Blues music, and his guitar licks are as good as you will hear anywhere. Sean Chambers explains that one of his favourite tracks is actually from his favourite Blues guitarist, Bullfrog Blues, by the late, great, Rory Gallagher. I must admit, it is very high on my list of Rory tunes, and this rendition sent shivers down my spine. Dear god, Sean Chambers and the guys poured so much energy into this re-working of Bullfrog Blues, that it left me almost numb. I'm certain that Rory would have been suitably impressed. This is, indeed a remarkable album, recorded live in front of a smallish audience, how lucky they are. A truly wonderful album Of Blues, and a very wonderful tip of the hat to Kim Simmonds and Savoy Brown.

STEPHEN HARRISON

DOUG SAHM AND THE SIR DOUGLAS QUINTET

THE COMPLETE MERCURY RECO0RDINGS

UNIVERSAL MUSIC

The Sir Douglas Quintet (what an utterly fabulous name!) are mainly remembered here in the UK as 'one hit wonders', for their peerless single, She's About A Mover, which was a wonderful piece of sixties blues kitsch. But as this lovingly collected mass of songs – five discs containing one-hundred-and-five songs, shows, that was the tip of an eclectic and wide-ranging iceberg of musical styles under the helm of guitarist and main man Doug Sahm. Obviously, it's impossible to do more than scratch the surface in the space allowed here, but if you are a fan of Texas blues, and country, and pop, and everything in between, then this collection deserves your scrutiny. With harmonies, full band arrangements with horns, acoustic numbers, jug band boogies, and that's just the Mono Singles disc. With a song like Sell A Song, it's clear that regardless of his diversions into other musical genres, Doug Sahm's heart and soul are in the blues. Song Of Everything showcases what a wounded and plaintive voice Sahm had, one for blues purists to savour. As a native of Texas, there is a sprinkling of Tex-Mex material scattered throughout the collection, including T-Bone Shuffle, but it's the stripped-back blues cuts like I Don't Want To Go Home that stick in the memory. Listening to any of these tracks shows beyond doubt that the 'one hit wonder' that UK music fans know, was absolutely untypical of the vast range and wonderfully heartfelt songs that Doug Sahm created over his too-short life. But in a way, as a signpost to his wider catalogue, a non-typical pop single is perfect for Doug Sahm and his various combos, because everything is non-typical! And that's what makes this box set such a joy to own. I always transfer music I enjoy into my car for a while, to keep me company as I travel the highways to gigs and interviews. This set of discs is going to keep me company for quite a long time.

ANDY HUGHES

STAN THE BAND

ONE NIGHT STAN

Independent

This live album was recorded at several local venues in the North East, including The Archer, The Tyne Bar, The Queens Hall Arts Centre, and The Cluny. I've been lucky enough to have captured these guys in a live setting recently, so I had a good idea of what the live album would probably sound like. With twelve songs and just one cover, Stan The Band has established themselves on the circuit in the North East over the last few years, this is largely due to them writing great songs (all four members jointly write them) as well as possessing a great stage presence that allows the audience to participate from the first number. Colin Burrows on lead vocals and guitar, is the focal point of the band, he has a great voice and a delivery not too dissimilar to that of Bryan Adams. I'm not trying to make any comparison, Colin is very much his own man, but that's the level that this band is at. Midnight Angel is not a ballad as such, nor is it a Blues/ Rock number, it strikes somewhere in between, yes, it does have ballad-type lyrics, but it then turns into what I can only describe as a sort of arena anthem. A brilliant tune with great guitar work by lead guitar player, Dave Kennedy. You've Gotta Believe, sees the introduction of Justin Radford on Saxophone. Now, if you thought that this band was good up until this point, Justin Radford allowed them to raise the bar to the highest level. Such a magnificent Soul/ Gospel tune, with Dave Kennedy belting out guitar lyrics, and Colin Burrows bursting every sinew of his vocal chords. As I said at the beginning, there is only one cover on this live album, and that is the last tune. The House Of The Rising Sun, which, incidentally, was a huge hit for another band from the North East, The Animals. So, it's fitting that Stan The Band should end what was a truly wonderful run of recorded gigs with a classic. Get to see this band as soon as possible.

STEPHEN HARRISON

THE PAUL FARR BLUES PROJECT

AS AND WHEN

Independent

Paul Farr, the seasoned six-string virtuoso and composer, is back with a fresh twist on the blues. Best known for his soulful work alongside powerhouse vocalist Kyla Brox, Farr has been quietly carving his own path for years, not just as a bandleader but as a go-to session player for the likes of Tom Jones and Lily Allen. Now, he's stepping out front and centre with The Paul Farr Blues Project; a new venture of differing musical notations and styles. This debut release, a nine-track instrumental gem, is a thrilling concoction of bluesy grooves, jazz-infused textures, and funky rhythms, with a raw improvisational edge that keeps you hooked from start to finish. Title track takes the listener to a laid-back relaxing place, smooth and sensual in parts. Benji's Blues is a quirky tune upbeat and groovy, as is the heady vibe on It's A Dogs Life. Another highlight is the final jazzier track, Smell The Coffee. Push Me Pull You is a sonic bluesy tune. Farr has teamed up with none other than Hammond organ maestro Jonny Henderson, a heavyweight known for his work with Matt Schofield, Robben Ford, and Elles Bailey. Holding it all down on the kit is drummer Mark Warburton, a longtime collaborator from Farr's days in The Kyla Brox Band. Together, this trio delivers an instrumental tour de force that's equal parts grit and finesse, proving that Farr's guitar is as expressive and commanding as ever. Whether you're a blues purist or a fan of genre-bending innovation, this is highly recommended for your collection.

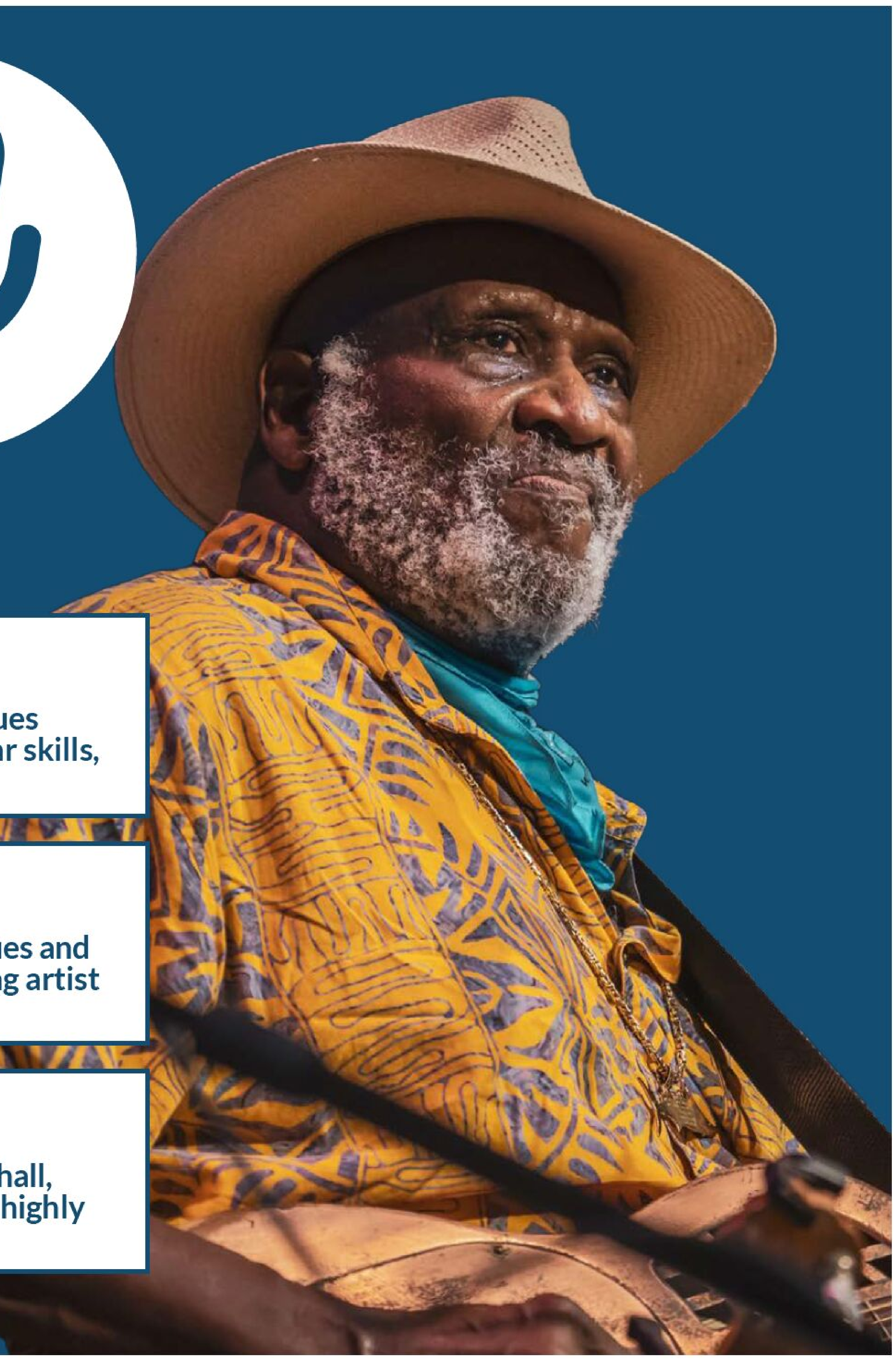
COLIN CAMPBELL

TREVOR BABAJACK STEGER

SIX FOOT TEN

Independent

The latest release from bluesman Trevor Babajack Steger, is as much a testament



LISTEN TO THE BLUES MATTERS

PODCAST

Listen to some amazing interviews with the artists we've been lucky enough to speak to for the magazine. **NOW ON YOUTUBE!**

SAMANTHA FISH
In this exciting episode, Adam Kennedy sits down with blues sensation Samantha Fish, known for her electrifying guitar skills, powerful vocals, and genre-defying sound.

TAJ MAHAL
We sit down with one of the most legendary figures in blues and world music—Taj Mahal. At 82 years young, this pioneering artist continues to defy expectations...

TERRY MARSHALL
In this episode, Steve Harrison sits down with Terry Marshall, founder of Marshall Records, to discuss the release of his highly anticipated new album.

to his ingenuity as it is to his artistry. This album eschews traditional studio polish, embracing the authenticity and raw energy of old field recordings. Inspired by these minimalist setups, Steger envisioned an album crafted in the most unconventional of spaces, his own narrowboat entitled Sirius. Transformed into a floating studio, the narrowboat provided both inspiration and constraint. Draped in blankets to soften the acoustics and outfitted with just two condenser microphones, Steger armed himself with national guitars, a box of harmonicas, and a well-stocked fridge. Over six immersive days, he explored, improvised, and refined, capturing the essence of ten tracks that became the album's foundation. He brought in trusted collaborators, including violinist Jo Chambers, percussionist Jesse Benns, and backing vocalist Lily Skinner. Producer Paul Jones transformed the vessel into a mobile studio. The results are a spirited, organic, and undeniably unique take on the traditional blues genre. Opening with the foot stomping, Farewell Sorrow full of hooks and Trevor's growling vocal delivery this sets the tone for the songs to follow; Drunken lullaby is a particular favourite haunting rhythm matches Trevor's inimitable storytelling. Jones's mixes, meticulously crafted, were sent to Matthew Devenish for mastering, rounding out an album that feels both expansive and personal. This release carries the warmth of a campfire session and the grit of blues roots, proving that creative freedom thrives in unexpected spaces. This is Steger at his most honest, raw, and resonant. This is a masterpiece a true work of musical artistry.

COLIN CAMPBELL

WILL WILDE

BLUES IS STILL ALIVE

VIZZTONE

WILL WILDE
BLUES IS STILL ALIVE

I'm finally won over from the 'Will Wilde? Yeah, not bad, take him or leave him' camp to 'where do I sign up for the fan club?' The Brighton native harmonica blower's playing somehow seems transformed since the last time I saw him live or heard him on CD and demonstrates an impressive command of blues song structures and an amazing ability to emulate the licks of the genre's guitar heroes. Blues Is Still Alive is not quite a ten out of ten album – it gets docked a couple of points for the sometimes-hackneyed lyrics – but it appeals on first listen, and there's no denying that the playing is phenomenal. The format on this collection is ten tracks, with Wilde credited as songwriter in all instances. The obvious stand-out is the title track, featuring a guest appearance by Walter Trout, with Wilde's solo easily matching the American's customary Stratocaster fluidity. The distorted harp wailing on Girl's Got Soul gives us an inkling of how Jimmy Reed might have sounded had he been addicted to cocaine instead of booze. The token acoustic number, Gypsy Woman, bears no slight resemblance to the trad jazz standard St James Infirmary. Don't Trust Me, which closes the set, put me in mind of Gary Moore's The Blues Is Alright, with Wilde's vocals reminiscent of the late Irish legend. Minor quibbles aside, this is great stuff, and perhaps even taking the instrument in new directions.

> *this is great stuff, and perhaps even taking the instrument in new directions*

DAVID OSLER

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

IBBA TOP 40

INDEPENDENT BLUES BROADCASTERS ASSOCIATION

bluesbroadcasters.co.uk

Position	Artist	Album
1	DOM MARTIN	BURIED ALIVE
2	THE HITMAN BLUES BAND	CALLING LONG DISTANCE
3	LEAVIN' TRUNK	THE RIVER
4	THE TERRAPLANES BLUES BAND	LIVE AT TEMPERANCE
5	MISSISSIPPI MACDONALD	I GOT WHAT YOU NEED
6	MARCUS TRUMMER	FROM THE START
7	GILES ROBSON & JOHN PRIMER	TEN CHICAGO BLUES CLASSICS
8	EDDIE 9V	SARATOGA
9	THE 2:19	KEEP MY WILL STRONG
10	KAI STRAUSS	WAILIN' IN VIENNA
11	BIG HARP GEORGE	BIG HARP GEORGE DOES CHRISTMAS
12	EVA CARBONI	BLUES SIREN
13	IAN SIEGAL MEETS JOHNNY MASTRO	EASY TIGER
14	FREEWORLD	MORE LOVE
15	ELLES BAILEY	BENEATH THE NEON GLOW
16	BRAVE RIVAL	FIGHT OR FLIGHT
17	BETH HART	YOU STILL GOT ME
18	BEN LEVIN	BEN LEVIN PRESENTS A HOLIDAY BLUES REVUE
19	C.W. AYON	BOUNCE, BOOGIE & BUMP
20	DAVID VEST & TERRY ROBB	CRISSCROSS
21	FRIED OKRA	DELUXE LIVE
22	ELLES BAILEY	LIVE AT THE FIRE STATION
23	WARREN HAYNES	MILLION VOICES WHISPER
24	OLLEE OWENS	NOWHERE TO HIDE
25	THE TOO BAD JIMS	OVER THE HILL: A TRIBUTE TO RL BURNSIDE
26	NEIL SADLER	PAST TO PRESENT
27	BIG WOLF BAND	REBEL'S JOURNEY
28	LUCY ZIRINS	CHASING CLOCKS
29	THE MAIN LINE	COBALT BLUE
30	JOVIN WEBB	DRIFTER
31	KRISSY MATTHEWS	KRISSY MATTHEWS & FRIENDS
32	ALICE ARMSTRONG	LIVE AT AREA 88
33	ROBBEN FORD & THE BLUE LINE	LIVE AT MONTREUX 1993
34	TERRY MARSHALL & FRIENDS	LIVING THE BLUES
35	KATIE KNIPP	ME
36	DAVE FERRA	THE MR. APOLLO SESSIONS
37	KENNY 'BLUES BOSS' WAYNE	OOH YEAH!
38	THE CASH BOX KINGS	OSCAR'S MOTEL
39	CONNOLLY HAYES	REMEMBER ME
40	KAT RIGGINS & HER BLUES REVIVAL	REVIVAL

SATCHVAI BAND

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STEVE VAI

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